

1 Samuel 8: 4 -- 22E 100 Block 7.2 April 2011 Israel asks for a King (John 18: 33 -- 37)

Introduction

We live in a country which has a Constitutional monarchy, and we are governed by a parliamentary democracy elected by -- well majority vote or something else -- (we choose in a few weeks.!)

Mankind has chosen and experimented with all sorts of governments in his time.

Republics, democracies like ours, other more limited democracies -- where just males, or just property holders had the vote and the power. Then we have socialist republics such as the old Soviet system -- Communists.

And dictators -- absolute rulers good and bad -- which includes Kings.

In our journey through the Bible we have reached the point where the people of Israel appointed their first Kings -- Saul and then David and his son Solomon. -- leading to the pinnacle of Israel's history -- the one time when they had both the land and peace. As we know from reading the rest of the Bible and the daily newspapers, it didn't last. But while it did it was their... golden age.

EXPOSITION

1. Old Testament Government

Up until this time, the time of our first bible reading, God's people had served Him as their king and ruler. God gave his people a law to live by, and God led his people fairly directly, often intervening miraculously when they trusted in him.

This understanding of the invisible God directly ruling his people was now being challenged by the people demanding a human king.

Isn't it understandable to ask for a visible leader to fight against all too visible enemies.

We may think so -- until we consider Israel's history so far.

God, had given his people human leaders. God had appointed Moses and Aaron, who had brought their forefathers out of Egypt.

Later, when in the land, Israel had suffered oppression from human enemies. especially when the people turned away from God.

when they asked for a King,

When Israel turned back to God the Lord had sent the leaders known as Judges: people like Gideon and Deborah and Samuel himself.

Through leaders like these, God won military victories for his people. The Judges were charismatic leaders sent by God as an expression of his own kingship over Israel.

But setting up a monarchy represented a turning away from God. The human leaders to whom Israel would owe allegiance would, like the leaders of pagan nations around them, hold office, not through God's call, but because of birth and heredity. Kings would pass the right to rule to their children, with no consideration of ability or moral character.

2. Israel's Foolishness

So, when they asked Samuel to appoint a King for them they were not only being foolish, they were showing a tragic lack of spiritual understanding.

There were 4 reasons why this was not a good idea.

First -- the call for a King was a rejection of God's traditional role in the nation's life.

The people wanted a King so that- "we will be like all the other nations"

Yet God had called Israel to be different from all the other nations. It was Israel's direct relationship with God that set her apart. Israel was in effect denying her unique heritage

Second -- Israel's call for a King went against the covenant God had made with them in Exodus.

They wanted a King because they thought it would help them to prosper as a nation.

Yet the basis of the covenant God had made with his people in Exodus was that they would always prosper when they obeyed God.

Whatever the form of government, God's people would only know blessing when they obeyed.

The form of government made no basic difference -- blessing could only come as a result of obedience of the whole people to the Lord.

Third -- (and perhaps most obviously) -- with a King as the visible head of the nation, many would begin to rely on him rather than on God.

Reliance would shift from God to the standing army and the fortifications the King would build.

And the fourth reason-

Fourth -- having a King introduced unnecessary danger.

Power and influence were focused in a human leader; An evil king had the power of life and death over his people. He could make wickedness appear to pay as he rewarded those who were loyal to him, rather than to God.

God, of course, had seen this coming. Moses had foretold the day when the people would demand a King. The laws that had been given on Sinai had been designed to minimise the dangers.

"When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel" (Deut. 17:14-20).

Israel's king was to subject himself to the King of kings. A king who would not be subject to God could and would bring disaster on the nation.

3. So Why did God grant them a King?

The motives of the people in demanding a king were wrong. And they lacked the spiritual insight to see the implications of their request. Yet God granted it. Why?

Sometimes God sadly lets people have their own way -- even though it's not His perfect plan for them.

(In the New Testament -- the prodigal son prematurely is allowed to have his half of the inheritance and is allowed to go into that far country so that he may prove how good and happy it is to starve among pigs.)

In spite of their rejection of him, God doesn't abandon his people. He gives them the kings they want and continues working out his plan through them.

when they asked for a King,

APPLICATIONS

So what can we learn from this for ourselves?

First, that there is no perfect or right form of government. Throughout history people have assumed that if only our society could devise the right form of government, that society would become just, and the people would enjoy the blessings of harmony and peace. Plato imagined his "republic", and philosophers and dreamers since then have devised various plans for their utopias -- right up to the "People's governments" of Communist Russia and China.

But the Bible makes it clear that our problems are not rooted in our forms of government but in ourselves.

Sin corrupts us all and because of sin no form of human government can promise justice or peace. (Though looking around today's world -- some seem more preferable than others)

The problem with human society is not political, but personal.

We do not need some better form of government to make us good. We need Jesus. We need the forgiveness of our sins, and an obedience to God that is expressed in a life of love for others.

And aren't we always a little like Israel? They wanted a king because the other nations had one- Every Christian faces the temptation to conform, to fit in, to want to be like the people around us. That is, to reject God's kingship of our lives and put our security in visible things. The elders of Israel had apparently no idea that they were actually rejecting God in wanting a King. They thought they were just, simply, taking proper precautions for the future.

We have that same difficulty as the Israelites had when it comes to living in quiet reliance on a power which our senses cannot detect.

But we do have a King- as we have been singing in this service, God is our king and we need to rely on him for our direction, both individually and as a nation.

when they asked for a King,

The Monarchy

Old Testament government

God's Old Testament people lived under two basic forms of national government. The first form was a theocracy. That is, God Himself served as Israel's King and Ruler. God gave His people a Law to live by (as legislator). God led His people in battle, often intervening miraculously to ensure victory when they trusted in Him (as chief executive). God made every individual and community responsible to hold each other accountable to perform the moral, social, and religious obligations set out in the Law (as judge). This understanding of the invisible God directly ruling His people was expressed by Samuel, who was shocked and outraged when the people demanded a human king. Samuel recalled the Israelites' reaction when they saw an enemy move against them: "You said to me, 'No, we want a king to rule over us'—even though the Lord your God was your King" ([1 Samuel 12:12](#)).

We might tend to excuse this demand for a visible leader to combat all too visible enemies, if it were not for history. For God, as King, had given His people human leaders. God had appointed Moses and Aaron, who brought this people's forefathers out of Egypt ([1 Samuel 12:6-7](#)). Later, in the land, Israel had suffered oppression from human enemies. But oppression had come only when the people turned away from God. When Israel turned back to God, the Lord sent the leaders known as Judges: people like Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, and Samuel ([1 Samuel 12:9-11](#)). Through leaders like these, God won military victories for His people. The Judges were charismatic leaders sent by God as an expression of the Lord's own kingship over Israel. They did not represent establishment of a different form of government.

But establishment of a monarchy *does* represent initiation of a different form of government. The human leaders to whom Israel would owe allegiance would, like the leaders of pagan nations around them, hold office not by virtue of God's call but by virtue of birth. Kings would pass the right to rule to their children, with no consideration of ability or of moral character.

Israel's foolishness

When in Samuel's day the people of Israel called for a king, they performed a foolish act. That is, they showed a tragic lack of spiritual understanding.

First of all, Israel's call for a king was in fact a rejection of God's traditional role in her national life.

The desire of the people was for a king so that "we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and go out before us and fight our battles" ([1 Samuel 8:20](#)). Yet God had called Israel *different* from all other nations. As Moses had said, "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him?" ([Deut. 4:7](#)) It was Israel's direct relationship with the God of heaven that set her apart. In calling for a king, Israel in effect rejected God's direct rule, and denied her unique heritage.

Second, Israel's call for a king disregarded a basic aspect of covenant relationship with God. God had committed Himself to bless His people when they lived in harmony with His Law. God had said, "Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess" ([Deut. 5:33](#)). This basic element of covenant relationship was unaffected by the introduction of a king.

Whatever the form of government, God's people would only know blessing when they obeyed!

When the monarchy was instituted, Samuel reminded Israel of this fact. "If you fear the Lord and serve and obey Him and do not rebel against His commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the Lord your God—good! But if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against His commands, His hand will be against you" ([1 Samuel 12:14-15](#)). The form of government made no basic difference. Blessing could come only as a result of obedience of the whole people to the Lord.

Third, with a king as the visible head of the nation, many would begin to rely on him rather than on God. Reliance would shift from God to the standing army and the fortifications the king would build. Erosion of reliance on God alone became a real and present danger.

Fourth, institution of the monarchy introduced unnecessary danger. Power and influence were focused in a human leader; a single individual who in turn could influence the nation. An evil king with the power of life and death over his people could make wickedness appear to pay as he rewarded those who were loyal to him rather than to God. Just such a danger exists any time that people must live with divided loyalties.

Moses had foretold a day when the people would demand a king, and the Law established requirements designed to minimize the

dangers. He said: "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,' be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.' He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

"When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel" ([Deut. 17:14-20](#)).

Israel's king was to subject himself to the King of kings. A king who would not be subject to God could and would bring disaster on the nation.

The coming king

The motives of the people of Israel in demanding a king were wrong. And they lacked the spiritual insight to see the implications of their request. Yet God granted it. Why?

At least two reasons can be suggested. The first reason is found in the fact that the three major institutions in Old Testament life each speak of Jesus. The priesthood was established to offer the sacrifices that affirmed and maintained relationship between God and sinful human beings. Jesus, as our High Priest, offered His own blood in history's ultimate sacrifice, making us forever acceptable to God. The prophet was established in Israel as God's spokesman, communicating His message to His people in time of need. Jesus is "the Prophet" spoken of in [Deut. 18](#), whose message both fulfills and supercedes that given by Moses. And the king was established in Israel as a ruler. Jesus is our present and coming King, who will surely establish His personal rule over this earth as well as the universe at large.

For us to understand the ministry of Jesus we need to sense the historic meaning of the priest, the prophet, and the king in Israel. Each of these offices was designed to help us grasp more of the role of Jesus in God's plan, and in our lives.

For this reason, then, that we might grasp the central role God intends for Jesus, it was necessary that Israel establish a monarchy and live under kings.

But there may be another, more subtle reason, that also points us to Jesus.

Throughout history human beings have assumed that if only a society might devise the *right form of government*, that society would become just and the people would enjoy the blessings of harmony and peace. Plato imagined his republic, and philosophers and dreamers since then have devised various plans for their utopias. But the Bible insists that our problems are not rooted in our forms of government, but in ourselves. Sin corrupts us all, and because of sin no form of human government can promise justice or peace.

Yet human beings continue to dream. And the Bible continues to testify that this dream is false! Israel sinned under Moses, the man of God. Israel sinned under the theocracy. Israel sinned under the monarchy. Israel sinned under Governor Nehemiah. Israel sinned as Rome's client state. And when Jesus returns, a world under Jesus' direct and righteous rule will again choose to follow Satan and rebel ([Rev. 20:1-10](#)).

In essence, history's many forms of government continually demonstrate that the problem with human society is not political, but personal. We do not need some new, inventive form of government to make us good. We need Jesus. We need the forgiveness of our sins, and an obedience to God that is expressed in a life of love for others.

God's willingness to let His people try different forms of government was at least in part intended to help them learn from their failures to turn away from man to find forgiveness in Him.

See also Alexander McLaren's commentary and the Essential 100 readings booklet.