



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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12. The Beginning of the Monarchy

1. The Setting

The book of Judges, in its last chapters, set the scene for the coming of the monarchy with its repeated lament about the state of the nation: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” (Judg. 17:6, cf. 18:1, 19:1, 21:25)

The capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines, during the time of Eli’s high priesthood, was not only a religious disaster but also a political and military one. The writer of 1Samuel devotes three whole chapters (1Sam. 4–6) to this matter: it is very important. Finding a home for the ark will come to feature through the following narrative. This was something given to Israel to do in Deuteronomy 12, but which had been left undone for centuries since the land had been entered:

¹ These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess--as long as you live in the land. ² Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. ³ Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. ⁴ You must not worship the LORD your God in their way.

⁵ But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; ⁶ there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. ⁷ There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.

⁸ You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit, ⁹ since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. ¹⁰ But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety.

¹¹ Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name--there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the LORD. ¹² And there rejoice before the LORD your God, you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns, who have no allotment or inheritance of their own. ¹³ Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. ¹⁴ Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you. (Deut. 12:1-14)

Finally the approaching death of Samuel, the great judge–prophet–priest in Israel, and the failure of his sons to follow Samuel in the LORD’s ways, but rather to chase for corrupt gain (1Sam. 8:1-3) raised very real questions about how Israel would continue as a nation (1Sam. 8:4). (Both Eli and Samuel had to face the disappointment of their sons turning away from the example they set. In both cases these sons were led astray by the love of money and gain. Cf. 1Tim. 6:6-10.)

2. The Seeking of a King

With concern about the transfer of power rising, the elders of Israel came to Samuel with a request for the instigation of a monarchy. Quite interestingly, Eli and Samuel

could not hand their leadership to their sons due to their corruption. The elders recognise this, but then ask for Samuel to begin a dynastic system of leadership. Maybe there is something in their request that prefers stability and continuity to integrity to the Lord?

Whether or not that is the case, their request comes in a very particular form:

“...now appoint a king to lead us, *such as all the other nations have.*” (1Sam. 8:5b)

The elders envied the nations around them, and have forgotten that, through their having and living by the law of God, they were meant to be the envy of the nations (Deut. 4:6-8). They were not to follow the example of the nations, and to do so would provoke the LORD’s jealous wrath (Deut. 6:14).

Samuel recognised the dynamics in what was being said, and was distressed by it. In his prayer to the LORD, however, he is redirected. Samuel’s concern was actually about the rejection this meant for him; in fact, the people were rejecting the LORD as their king. This desire for a king “like all the other nations” was linked to their persistent idolatry.

The LORD’s response to the request was to grant it! (Be careful what you pray for!) But the with granting came a warning of what the request would actually result in: tyranny, slavery, exploitation until finally the people will cry out to the LORD for relief from the king that they had chosen; but the LORD will not listen on that day (1Sam. 8:9-18). Despite the strong warning, the people insisted on a king being set over them.

3. What of the will of God?

Was the kingship in Israel, then, contrary to the purpose of God for His people? Actually, from the call of Abraham onwards, the theme of kingship had been slowly and steadily growing.

God had said to Abraham:

⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. (Gen. 17:4-6)

God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” (Gen. 17:15-16)

The promise to Abraham may well have spoken more widely than Israel, and included Ishmael, but the promise to Sarah can only be Israel traced through Isaac. This promise had then been repeated to Jacob when he wrestled with the God at the Jabbok:

¹⁰ God said to him, “Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” So he named him Israel. ¹¹ And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body.” (Gen. 35:10-11)

And then on his death bed, as he blessed his sons, Jacob had prophesied concerning Judah, anticipating a great king who would come as the fulfilment of Judah’s own ruling in Israel:

The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, and the obedience of the nations is his. (Gen. 49:10)

When called on to curse Israel, Balaam the pagan oracle was in fact filled with the Spirit and prophesied thus:

¹⁵ The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, ¹⁶ the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened: ¹⁷ “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. ¹⁸ Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. ¹⁹ A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city.” (Num. 24:15-19)

And finally, most decisively, the LORD made provision for the kingship in His law given just as Israel was to enter the land. This provision recognised the wrongness of motivation in the people for asking, but also set in place the necessity of finding the king the LORD chose, and set out the way in which the king was to operate. It was a most unusual kind of kingship, quite contrary to the ways of the kings of all the other nations:

¹⁴ 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,” ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.” ¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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 ²⁰ 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)

Everything of his kingdom was to be the negation of the assumed strength of the kingdoms of the world. He was to reject military strength (v. 16), political alliance (v. 17a) and economic clout (v. 17b). Rather than strength, *humility* was to be the mark of his rule, shown in his dependence upon the law of God and obedience to it.

We know too that this kingly line would finally find its consummation in the coming of the great, humble king, Jesus the Christ.

So we find, as we find throughout Scripture, what people meant for evil, God meant for good, for the establishing of His salvation purpose in history. The story of salvation trains us not to be in panic when it seems the godless or the wicked are triumphing; though they do their will, God does His will. And finally all the will of evil humanity will be lost in the completion of the will of God in Christ Jesus.

4. The first king

Again, as we have seen time and again through the unfolding story, the scene changes as we enter 1Samuel 9, into a very domestic situation that seems far removed from the mighty matters we have just discussed. A man has lost his donkeys; his son has been sent out into the countryside to find them. The search was fruitless: the son, a tall and good-looking man called Saul, decided to return home, except that his servant urged him to seek some divine guidance through a prophet staying nearby—it was actually the judge Samuel! He was in the town on a passing visit, and was offering a sacrifice at the high place in the town. Samuel had been prepared for this by the LORD the day prior, being told that the one to be anointed would come the next day, in the mercy of

God to His people (1Sam. 9:15-16). Again note how things seem to hang on a slender thread, a slim chance, a strange coincidence in these events.

Saul was shocked by Samuel's anointing, but that this is the will of God was marked by some signs. He kept the matter secret, perhaps reluctant to embrace it, until finally he had to come out in the open with it, when Samuel led Israel in the process of seeing the one that the LORD had chosen.

The story of Saul is that of a man who began well, humble enough to begin with, but who developed that strange "schizophrenia" of all who live outside of covenant grace with God. On the one hand, he was frightened to do anything without clear omen from God lest he displease him (e.g. 1Sam. 14); on the other hand he would rush ahead contrary to God's will and do that which was forbidden him, e.g. offering sacrifice (1Sam. 13, 15). At the last, this meant that Saul did not walk according to the law set out in Deuteronomy 17 (1Sam. 13:13; 15:22-29), and so his kingship was forfeit. Another would replace him. Saul's whole kingship from that point on (which stretched to the end of 1Samuel (18 chapters later)) was marked by a craven terror about this, and a refusal to accept the LORD's discipline.