

DAVID'S SUCCESSORS

KINGSHIP IN
THE OLD TESTAMENT



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B. Intertextual Biblical Interpretation

The Old Testament offers us many different views of kingship. We will have a wide range of views—from a very limited array of monarchical power in Deuteronomy to maximal notions of a king and what a king represents in the Psalms. We will find views on kingship becoming more nuanced as we work our way through the Deuteronomistic History, with more diversity at the end of it. The Writing Prophets will also expose a number of different views on kingship, with wide variations from Isaiah to Jeremiah. Finally, we will consider the Megilloth (Ruth, Song, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther) and the more compassionate and humanistic views on display there.

1. Deuteronomy 17

Bernard Levinson has already shown us what a central role Deuteronomy 17 has played in setting out the image of the king. The book

¹⁴ Ibid., 319.

¹⁵ Mark W. Hamilton, *The Body Royal: The Social Poetics of Kingship in Ancient Israel*, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 15.

of Deuteronomy treats monarchy in a section concerned with institutions of a secular character, including the judiciary in Deuteronomy 16 and the military in Deuteronomy 20. This has led Moshe Weinfeld to characterize the book of Deuteronomy as having "an absence of sacral institutions."¹⁶ This absence points to Deuteronomy characterizing kingship in a much different way than both the rest of the ancient Near East and much of the Old Testament. For example, we find much more sacral characterizations of kingship in the Psalms. Jeffrey Tigay will tell us that in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, [T]he "role of the king—the official likely to become the most powerful and prestigious—is deemphasized more than that of any other official."¹⁷ Tigay will go on to contrast Israel with Mesopotamia and Egypt, where kingship was absolute, and conclude that these absolute "ideas had few echoes in Israel."¹⁸ While these ideas may not be echoed here in Deuteronomy 17, I will argue that Deuteronomy 17 is responding to echoes of these ideas in other parts of the Old Testament and wonder about how assured we can be of "few echoes in Israel." Was Israel really that different from the rest of the ancient Near East? Do we find few echoes of Mesopotamian prayer forms in the Old Testament? Do we find few echoes of ancient Near Eastern tribal practices in the Old Testament?

Deuteronomy focuses on the ideal rather than the real. Levinson has helped us to understand Deuteronomy 17 as a reconceptualization. The reality of what we find in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles has been conformed to the vision of the authors of Deuteronomy. Thomas Mann will argue: "Deuteronomy recognizes the reality, but holds out for the ideal ruler."¹⁹ This ideal ruler may finally appear at the end of 2 Kings in Josiah, but the reality from Saul to Manasseh may be very different from what we encounter in the pages of the Bible. Rather than treat Israel as an entity completely foreign to the ancient Near East, political science would suggest that its peoples may have the same desire for kingship as the rest of the ancient Near East. The scribal class has

¹⁶ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 29.

¹⁷ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 166.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Thomas W. Mann, *Deuteronomy*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 126.

constructed an ideal vision here in Deuteronomy, but this is a small class of people with very different interests and influences than the vast majority.

2. 1 Samuel

Christophe Nihan has demonstrated for us how 1 Samuel participates in the reconceptualization of kingship in a more limited manner than Deuteronomy 17. While Deuteronomy 17 treats kingship in a completely secular manner, 1 Samuel still acknowledges some of the sacral nature of Israelite kingship that overflows from the Enthronement Psalms (47; 93; 96–99) and Psalms 74 and 89 as Yahweh asserts to kingship. Critics have noted that 1 Samuel 8–12 seems to combine "a pro- and an antimonarchical source."²⁰ This section starts with the frank admission of the corrupting influences on the sons of Samuel (1 Sam 8:3). First Samuel 8:11–17 leaves no doubt about the hazards of kingship, as Samuel warns the people that the king will take their sons, daughters, and land for his own needs; yet the chapter concludes with the Lord telling Samuel: "Grant their request and appoint a king to rule them" (1 Sam 8:22a). After noting the relationship between Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8, McCarter will acknowledge the sacral nature present here that is not present in Deuteronomy 17: "And in a sense kingship receives a divine sanction here, even if only in a backhanded way, for Yahweh himself consents to the appointment."²¹ 1 Samuel 8 may be trying to strike a balance between older notions of the sacral nature of kings and the actual history of having to endure and indulge the excesses of kingship.

If 1 Samuel 8 tries to strike a balance, 1 Samuel 12 moves much more in the direction of Deuteronomy 17. Samuel has granted the wishes of the people and set a king over them (1 Sam 12:1), but he is not about to relinquish all of his power, as he quickly attests to his own virtues of honesty and justice (1 Sam 12:3). Being both a judge and a prophet, Samuel seems willing to cede his powers as judge while maximizing his powers as prophet. "Samuel appears to be claiming an ongoing role before the Lord's anointed. He is far from having been

²⁰ David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 71.

²¹ P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel: A New Translation*, Anchor Bible, vol. 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 162.

completely supplanted."²² The ambiguity found in 1 Samuel 8–12 will play itself out throughout the rest of 1–2 Samuel, but the books will generally have much more positive and sacral accounts of kingship. We will hear of Saul and David as tremendous military leaders remembered for their personal triumphs (1 Sam 18:7). The sacral nature of Saul's kingship manifests itself clearly in the Old Testament as we are told that "God gave him another heart" (1 Sam 10:9), and Saul's peers almost immediately perceive the change (1 Sam 10:11). Samuel discovers David, and we hear that "the LORD rushed upon David" (1 Sam 16:13). We find another maximal presentation of the sacral nature of kingship here. While a prophet remains part of the process, the prophet has become secondary. I believe 1 Samuel 12 can be seen as the last of the maximalist expressions of restrictions on kingly power in the Deuteronomistic History. It shares the spirit of Deuteronomy 17, but the reconceptualization of kingship generally diminishes the further we move from Deuteronomy 17 with the possible exception of Josiah.

3. *The Books of Kings*

We draw much of the material on the individual kings from the books of Kings. This material comes to us in two basic forms. We have almost standardized reports at the beginning and ending of the life of kings, which many have attributed to some sort of annals. We repeatedly hear about the book of the chronicles of kings of Israel (1 Kgs 16:27) or the book of chronicles of the kings of Judah (2 Kgs 15:31). These reports tend to be summary in nature, connected with the death of the king. In between the reports of the king coming to power or dying, we have much more colorful stories involving the king with his prophets, attendants, and others facing the difficulties and challenges of his time. These stories can be positive about the kings, but they are likely to be quite critical of the king. They have often been used to construct the historiography of the time and used like the annals in a number of histories of Israel. More recent commentators point to the nonhistoriographical nature of the book.²³ This has led to a sea change in how we reconstruct the history of Israel.

²² A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 128.

²³ Thomas Römer, "The Case of the Book of Kings," in *Deuteronomy–Kings as Emerging Authoritative Books: A Conversation*, ed. Diana V. Edelman, Ancient Near

4. *The Books of Chronicles*

The books of Chronicles have been largely overlooked. I will argue for the necessity of thinking about Chronicles as we think about Kings. Many have relegated Chronicles to the status of a tendentious book that cleans up kings like Manasseh. They see the books of Kings as the far more historiographical books. I will argue that both books take theological stances toward the kings rather than objective stances toward the kings. If we see both books as operating out of a powerfully theological hermeneutic, we can see how Chronicles may be a little closer to the original conceptualization of the king. Since it is not part of the Deuteronomistic History like 1–2 Kings, it may allow us a different understanding of kingship that precedes the books of Kings at times. We still need to acknowledge the tremendous influence of the Deuteronomistic History on the books of Chronicles while seeing that there are other influences on Chronicles that do not seem to be as present in the books of Kings.

5. *Psalms*

While the book of Psalms tells us almost nothing about the individual kings that this book will consider, it will be very helpful in giving us some ideas of the original sacral nature of the king. The psalms represent the fullest expression of the sacral nature of kingship in the Old Testament. Keith Whitelam tells us: "The theme of Yahweh's kingship is given its most explicit treatment in the Psalter."²⁴ These psalms include Psalms 2, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 96–99, 101, 132, and 141. These psalms could not be further from the book of Deuteronomy, which treats the king as a secular institution. These psalms view the king as a wholly transformed being: the anointed of the Lord. "This signifies transformation of his being to that of a man who is fully committed to God's side, as God's representative and heir, as the administrator of God's lordship over Israel."²⁵ Rather than concerning themselves with the vicissitudes of history, these psalms set out the pure conceptualization

East Monographs (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 193: "Kings is not much interested in the political achievements of various rulers."

²⁴ Keith Whitelam, "King and Kingship," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:43.

²⁵ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 115.

of kingship. H.-J. Kraus will tell us the Psalms "present the static world of sacred places and times of worship, while the other books deal with the active dynamic world of the events of history."²⁶ This book will mostly be considering the other books of dynamic history, but the understanding of Israelite kingship demands that the conceptualization of it from the Psalms not be far from our minds.

Some will say that the Psalms are subjugated to the vision of kingship in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. A common theme emanates from the idea of how different Israel is from the ancient Near East. "The enforcement of law, the source and subject of which was now God and not—in contrast to Egypt and Mesopotamia—the king, also became a *critical institution*, which protected the law from being absorbed by the state or even being turned into its opposite."²⁷ I believe that we have very little beyond the rhetoric of the Old Testament to differentiate kingship in Israel from the ancient Near East. The Old Testament describes contrasting theological visions, and it is hard to articulate the reality beneath them. It seems safer and more prudent to understand Israel as having many of the same tensions as the other nations of the ancient Near East. This is certainly what we find outside of the idealistic texts concerning the law. I will argue that the fullness of the vision of kingship in the Psalms does not and cannot conform to the texts where kingship is reconceptualized in Deuteronomy 17, 1 Samuel 8, and 1 Samuel 12.

6. Writing Prophets

The so-called Writing Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and the Twelve) show an important diversity of opinions toward kingship. We see a figure like Isaiah who works very closely with King Hezekiah. Their relationship is heavily chronicled in both 2 Kings 18–20 and Isaiah 36–39, with a much lighter treatment of it given in Chronicles. Most scholars seem to believe that the Kings text has priority over the Isaiah text as Isaiah seems to be reworking the story.²⁸ Both sources indicate that Isaiah has important access to him. Second Kings 20:1

²⁶ Ibid., 16.

²⁷ Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, trans. Armin Siedlecki (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 133.

²⁸ Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 411.

displays a particular closeness between Isaiah and Hezekiah as "the prophet functions as a royal adviser to ensure a proper and orderly succession."²⁹ Isaiah has bolstered Hezekiah during his standoff with the Assyrians (2 Kgs 19:5-35; Isa 37:21-36), and most commentators see the following episode of Hezekiah's illness (2 Kgs 20:1-3; Isa 38:1-3) as a testament to the strength of their relationship.³⁰

Jeremiah is a harder figure to categorize. Parts of his book seem to be quite Deuteronomic, and other parts such as the laments seem to have a theodicy closer to Job. He has even been described as a propagandist on behalf of Josiah.³¹ Most of the references to Josiah within Jeremiah are cursory in nature; Josiah is often merely described as the father of Jehoiakim (Jer 35:1) or Zedekiah (Jer 27:1). Jeremiah's only substantive remarks about Josiah are at 22:15, when he is condemning Jehoiakim: "Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?"³²

One can infer from these remarks a certain amount of respect for Josiah, but one does not see the perfect ruler of Judah, as he is described by DH (2 Kgs 23:25). Jeremiah's failure to describe Josiah as a reformer stands in clear contrast to descriptions of Josiah in Kings and Chronicles. This failure to describe Josiah as a reformer is hardly surprising when one considers that Jeremiah condemns the temple in chapter 7, the lack of covenant fidelity in chapter 11, and those who are wise in the Torah in chapter 8. It is notable that Jeremiah does not mention the death of Josiah. Jeremiah had an intense dislike of Israel's political involvement with Egypt, as can be seen from his oracle against Egypt in chapter 46. I wonder why he would fail to mention that Egypt killed this just and righteous king. Jeremiah demonstrates a much more complex relationship with kings than Isaiah. He can see the good in Josiah, but he is implicitly critical of Josiah's successors,

²⁹ T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 290.

³⁰ Burke O. Long, *2 Kings*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 237.

³¹ Norbert Lohfink, "The Cult Reform of Josiah of Judah: 2 Kings 22–23 as a Source for the History of Israel," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 469: "The young Jeremiah also appears to have been active as a propagandist for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, springing from joy over new salvation to be wrought by Jerusalem."

³² Scripture translation is by the author.

Jehoiakim (Jer 26:21) and Zedekiah (Jer 29:22). Zedekiah is compared to Ahab, as both were rightfully "roasted" by their adversaries. We end up seeing kingship being far less sacral in Jeremiah than it is in Isaiah.

7. The Megilloth

Finally, we will see different perspectives in the Megilloth (Ruth, Song, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther). Although these books are found scattered across the Christian Old Testament, they appear in this order in the Hebrew Bible. Kingship comes up in three of the books: Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. Solomon is the hero of Ecclesiastes as he dispenses advice and a dissident wisdom to his readers (Eccl 1:1). Solomon will be mentioned six times in Song of Songs, the book that precedes Ecclesiastes. He will also be mentioned three times in a more standard piece of Wisdom literature: Proverbs. I believe all this goes to show a widely held positive attitude toward the king in the popular imagination, as it seems to be important to associate the king with these books. Lamentations concerns the fall of Jerusalem, but it treats kingship respectfully. Lamentations represents a love for even the seemingly disastrous kings that the ideology of DH or Jeremiah does not seem to allow as it mourns "the anointed" (Lam 4:20). The Megilloth closes with the bombastic figure of King Ahasuerus. While he provides mainly comic relief, he is still more part of the solution rather than part of the problem. This figure may highlight a general willingness to forgive the shortcomings of a king and hold his attendants responsible. All these depictions speak in one way or another to the figure of the popular imagination behind the reconceptualization in Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8 and 12, which ultimately has diminished in the popular imagination of many contemporary scholars and believers alike.