

Alliance Theological Seminary
OT 504.NA Hebrew Bible in the Eastern Mediterranean World
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Hebrew Bible in the Eastern Mediterranean World Interpretive Essay # 1

Reread chapter 12 entitled “The Monarch” in Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE by Victor Matthews: Review what Matthews says about The Monarch in the Stories of Meribaal (2 Sam 9:1-13; 16:1-4; 19:24-30)” What is the social situation in Israel at this time? How does Matthews; analysis impact on your reading of these passages? What is the role of the monarch in the Ancient Near East? Does David act as a “typical monarch” in these passages? Defend your answer. Consult to examine and prepare your paper.

It is said knowledge is power and few at the hierarchical level will divulge all, if any of their secrets. The dominant aim of those who achieve or rise to supreme power do their utmost to remain in the prestigious seat. The insatiable hunger for success or retention of power leads to power struggle, deception, conspiracy/ violence. In the Ancient Near East, power was wielded as a means to an end to achieve protection against foreign conquests, secure goods and services for their subjects and optimally provided a surplus to maintain the lifestyle of the sovereign power of the monarch.

In the text Social World of Ancient Israel, Victor H. Matthews gives a brief historiography of the monarch with the help of resources namely archaeological, geographical location, social conditions, biblical views, epigraphic with presentations of relevant plot elements of narratives, maps and glossary. Matthews presents a vivid outlook on the monarchy yet with a different perspective which stimulates thought provoking ideas about the monarch, its kingship, inner circle and subjects.

THE MONARCH

According to Matthews, the monarchy was a system of rule with a monarch as its head; the hereditary system passed from one monarch to another. Kingship rule by a single, male monarch was the nearly exclusive form of government in the ancient Near East. Usurpation- succession by someone who was not an heir was relatively common and was not peaceful. Customarily, it

entailed a violent overthrow by a military rival of the king or dynasty or both and slaughter of supporters and family members of the former king or dynasty. The domains of kings in the Ancient Near East varied in size. Some administered city - state while others had vast empires. A hierarchy existed among the kings. The monarchy was responsible for maintaining a standing army to uphold order in local territories, border control and expansion. The monarch manipulated centralization, production and distribution and imposed burdensome taxes. Kings were viewed as semi cosmic, earthly representatives who appeased the gods and brought blessings to the people and their land. The Pope is viewed by Catholics in similar manner. Exclusively, Israel's king served as "the earthly head of God's theocratic kingdom." **A Survey of the Old Testament** Walton & Hill. The psalter reaffirms that the king was their source of strength; breath of life; defender of the poor, carrier of God's grace. [Ps 89, 72, 90, Lam 4:20]. Consequently, he had to be protected in the interests of the nation [2 Sam 18:3]. Interestingly, political power today in secular democracies, the Church is separate from the State; unlike that of the Ancient Near East monarchy.

DAVIDIC REIGN:

Unlike any other king, David recognized, acknowledged and paid reverence to the celestial King – YHWH. He often ensured that his plans were approved by YHWH before implementation. David had an intimate relationship with God [2 Sam 7:14-16] "I will be a father to him, and he shall be my son... your house/kingdom will be established forever." [Ps 2] "Today I have begotten you." (Songs of psalter were sung at national events which further solidified the king's role in the minds of the people to the extent as of a pedestal view). David was chosen by God for the people and by the people.

The book of Samuel gave graphic accounts of David's dynasty including 'flaws and all.' The author depicted David in all of his humanity yet as an exuberant worshipper [2 Sam 6:14-16], obedient servant of YHWH, courageous warrior [Sam 23:8-39], successful king with poor parenting skills [2 Sam 14:12-25] and a man who succumbed to his fleshly desires [2 Sam 11]. David's most striking characteristic was his intimate relationship with YHWH; he 'fessed up when he messed up.' Similar to the book of Samuel, Matthews reverberated that David's influential charisma coupled with his military expertise gained him national recognition both domestically and internationally. His conquests revealed YHWH's endorsement via blessings of peace, fertility, habitability in the nation with wisdom to rule in lawfulness and justice. "Then he will judge your people fairly, and your oppressed one equitably, ... news of peace to the people and the hills will announce justice [Ps 72:2-4]. David gave obeisance to the sovereign celestial King and was rewarded with just rulership.

SOCIAL CLIMATE

No one can predict the precise decision or next course of action by those in political power. Irrespective of their moral standing, integrity or past successes especially when a “conflict arises that clash with the morally upright and honorable thing to do.” *The Beginning of Politics in the Biblical Book of Samuel*, “

Unlike any other king “David was not a usurper of the throne” *A Survey of the Old Testament*” Walton & Hill. At the height of his prosperity, David recalled and fulfilled an oath made between himself and his beloved friend, Jonathan. He ignored the custom to eliminate all of the former dynasty. David showed (hesed) kindness to Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth as the first born of his father, Jonathan and his grandfather King Saul he was the heir to Saul’s dynasty. Matthews contends that David harbored ulterior motives. Other scholars also agreed as it is aptly stated, “The best way to weaken a pretender’s claims was to make a pensioner of him, and the best way to hinder his doing mischief was to keep him in sight.” *The Beginning of Politics in the Biblical Book of Samuel*. In ancient near east, it was customary for rulers to keep spies in view to limit their movements.

A permanent invitation for Mephibosheth to dine at the king’s table [2Sam 9:1-7]. David’s subtle actions, showed his faithfulness to Jonathan but also deduced his intent to protect his kingship from a possible overthrow. Seated at the royal table, David could better educate Mephibosheth along his line of thinking and know of his activities. Saul’s land is restored to his grandson but under the legal guardianship of his servant Ziba [I Chron 6:39-66]. It is possible, David wielded his sovereign political power as a means to an end. Ironically, David’s act of kindness and grace to lame [2 Sam 9:3] Meriba’al by seeking him out of Lo-debar (no pasture) changed his name to Mephibosheth; restored to him his grandfather Saul’s land and gave him access to the royal table to eat all his life foreshadows what Jesus did for mankind.

Lessons learnt – Unknown aliens [Eph 2:12] and “lame” sick in our sins, Jesus pursued, chose, forgave, cleansed renewed us. We have been given the privilege of adoption and made joint heirs with YHWH all because of God’s love [John 3:16, Jer 31:3] and GRACE [Eph 2:8-9].

A one-sided deal, GRACE brings us back in alignment with God.

Christians should look for opportunities to be kind to others especially if the favor may never be reciprocated.

POLITICAL POWER

The social conditions changed in Sam 16:1-4. David's house was in turmoil and the nation was negatively impacted by his sinful actions. The Uriah story was the most significant and devastating blow to the Davidic reign. It highlighted political violence concocted by supreme power where the plot concealed his direct involvement. Wielders of those in high power believed they are above the law and can do what they want when they desire so [2 Sam 12:10]. David became over-confident in his successes, exercised a sense of entitlement, recklessness, pride and lust. The power of authority and delegation allowed a supreme power to issue orders to subordinates with the assurance they will be discharged. David breached the line of justice and committed a political crime when he schemed a plot to kill Uriah so he could satiate his lustful pleasures with Uriah's wife.

Confronted by the prophet, he resorted to obfuscation of his political responsibility. David's adultery, murder and deceptive actions connected with the internecine family feuds [2 Sam 13:15-22; 23-39] tarnished his reign and negatively impacted the nation of Israel [2Sam 10:1-1; 24:11-17; 1 Chronicles 21:7-17]

Abuse of political authority distorts a leader's motives and dispositions. It engulfs one into the dark abyss of political crimes. Images of the January 6, 2021, insurrection in USA, are frequently televised. It revealed the abuse of supreme power when a president coerced his supporters to violently attack the Capitol in retribution to those whom he alleged fraudulently stole the election.

Lessons learnt – humans/ Christians especially those in authority should stay humble. Do not try to benefit at another's expense. Allow the Holy Spirit to direct you daily. God does not abhor sin. "The sword shall never depart from thine house," [2 Sam 12:10]. However, if we confess our sins as David did [Ps 51:1-3, 10-11] God is merciful and rules with justice. He will forgive.

POWER STRUGGLES

Absalom, led a revolt to usurp his father's kingship. The rape and incest of his sister Tamar by her brother Amnon infuriated Absalom. As a designated protector of his sister's virginity; Absalom defended her shame and his honor. He schemed a plot and ordered Amnon's murder. He sexually violated his father's concubines then campaigned against his father for kingship. Notably, Absalom was a contender in line for the succession of David's throne. The author shows David's poor parenting skills and the consequences of his sinful acts towards his loyal and

faithful soldier, Uriah. Absalom was defeated and killed in battle. The power of validation by David as a father was absent. He should have confronted Amnon on the rape of his daughter Tamar. A family meeting was imminent but ignored.

While David was at war with his son, Ziba, (court appointed legal guardian of Saul's land) Mephibosheth's servant met David with gifts. David inquired after his lame master Mephibosheth. In response, Ziba presented a libelous account of resistance, conspiracy and espionage about his master, Mephibosheth. He capitalized on David's emotional state and seized an opportunity to be reinstated as de facto ruler of the House of Saul. Ziba and his sons had enjoyed such privileges while Mephibosheth was in hiding. [2 Sam 9:1-10]. David exercised his power as Controller of the land based on Ziba's account. He reversed his previous promise to Mephibosheth and gave Ziba full possession of his master's land. Ziba carried out a deposition in the House of Saul while Absalom attempted the same thing in the House of David.

“Great power is a magnet for deception and other strategies of manipulation. This is one reason why power routinely distorts the judgment of those who wield it.” *The Beginning of Politics in the Biblical Book of Samuel*. David was in a vulnerable, depressive emotional state. He should not have made such a hasty judgment.

Lessons learnt: Challenge a negative report on others. Invite the accuser to state the charges in the presence of the accused. The underlying cause might be with the accuser(s).

Honor your parents (Absalom). Make time to listen to your children. Respect their opinions.

An apology can save a relationship It connects parents and children. The example modeled will mold a child into a stable adult.

MEPHIBOSHETH

David fled his throne in pursuit of his life. The author, Matthews argued that David needed validation from his supporters. Ziba's betrayal report of Mephibosheth casts him as unloyal, ungrateful and untrustworthy. The author of Samuel presented an ambiguous account which makes interpretation debatable. Scholars still grapple with which character -Ziba or Mephibosheth presented the truth as they both made sense. The author did allow Mephibosheth to have the final say. Is it an indication on the author's part that he was honest?

Mephibosheth was lame in both his feet. It can be argued that Ziba took advantage of both Mephibosheth's disability and David's vulnerability.

Matthews explicated centralization, state distribution and the monarch's control [172-173; 175] on Saul's land. He also showed the authoritative right of David to redistribute the land to Ziba [174]. Matthews did not elaborate on the physical and apparent emotional state of Mephibosheth when he appealed to David. In my opinion, Mephibosheth's unkempt appearance revealed that he was concerned for David's safety. Ziba's lies that Mephibosheth desire to usurp David's kingship was dubious. Lame Mephibosheth could not achieve such a feat and David had more sons to succeed to the throne. Mephibosheth's delayed response to show support discredited him. Mephibosheth should have been more proactive.

I agree with Matthews that David attempts to stabilize his fractured relationship with the House of Saul [174]. David was pursued by Saul who tried to kill him. Saul's children, Jonathan, with whom David made a covenant and Michal, David's wife. She later tricked her father [I Sam 18:20-28; 19:11-17; II Sam 6:16-23 & I Chron 15"29] and allowed David to escape. Jonathan divulged secrets to David [I Sam 20:18-23; 20:41] and helped him preserve his life from Saul. Both chose to remain in their father's monarch rather than be devoted with David's abscondment. Mephibosheth now mirrors a similar attitude of indifference to David's act of kindness to him. His procrastinated response discredited him. Mephibosheth should have been more proactive. The hierarchy of political power attracts misinformation or covert selective information from others who wield power as a means to an end. Ziba would greatly benefit as his 15 sons and servants would be serviced by this acquisition. David wearied from all the usurpation by Absalom, rebelled, lied and disrespected by others was reluctant to accept Mephibosheth's self- abasement. [2 Sam19:29]

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to determine if Ziba or Mephibosheth was honest. Both appeared to have benefitted based on Ziba's betrayal or Mephibosheth's land appeal. Birds of a feather flock together. Both espouse unfavorable character traits and they may have had ulterior motives. Matthews detailed account of the perpetuity of land and sons showed the extent to which those who have power will use it to their advantage.

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The royal paranoia and obsessive mistrust that we observe here are also accompanied by outpourings of narcissism and self- pity.