

OT 504: Hebrew Bible and the Eastern Mediterranean World

Professor R. Russell Mack, PhD

Essay 2 ANE Context

By Davis A. Ostrander

The Israelites Demand a King

I Samuel Chapter 8, Walton Chapter 12

The people of Israel wanted to be like all the other nations. In many ways, the King would be like the Kings of the nations that surrounded them, but in some very distinct ways, Israel's king would set Israel apart as a nation whose God is Yahweh, and point Israel to the coming Messiah. The children of Israel were nomads. (Widbin p50-63). They traveled from place to place looking for grazing lands for their flocks of sheep, but when they demanded a King life would start to revolve around cities and the new King would need an army and a palace.

Walton states "There were certainly economic, technological, ecological, military, political, and above all, religious aspects to the development of urbanization". (Walton p253). Samuel had judged Israel for many years. The Bible says that "Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went on to circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would return to Rahmah for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel. And he built an altar to the Lord". (1 Sam 7:15-17 ESV). Samuel was a faithful servant of the Lord who obeyed Yahweh and led the Israelites to victory over their enemies. "So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel". (1 Sam 7:13).

But with every good government on earth, the leader got old. He put his sons in charge, but they didn't obey the Lord. The people cried out for a King to lead them as the other nations. At first, Samuel took this as a rejection of his leadership, but God assured Samuel that this wasn't the case. "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being a King over them". (1 Sam 8:7 ESV). God instructed Samuel to warn the people, "Now then, obey their voice, only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the way of the King who shall reign over them". (1 Sam 8:9 ESV).

By choosing a King, the Israelite's way of life would drastically change. Many of them would become servants to the King and their economy would shift from a rural agrarian society to an economy that fueled the war machine in today's words!

Samuel spells out in detail what having a King other than Yahweh would be like, "he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. 12 And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be performers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchard and give them to his servants. 15 He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. 16 He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and donkeys and put them to work. 17 He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves ". (1 Sam 8:11-17 ESV).

The Israelites wanted to be like the other nations and have a King and in doing so rejected Yahweh. The Kings of the nations were the leaders of their nations, and they protected their citizens from invading forces. They kept the nation at peace and provided for public works

projects. They were mediators between the gods and men and were thought of as being descended from the gods. (Walton p256). It's no wonder the Hebrews wanted a King. The Hebrews needed a leader to deliver them from Nahash, King of Rabbath – Ammon. According to an addition to the Biblical text, found in the dead sea scrolls, this King was more than just threatening Israel. He had already captured several nations and put out their right eyes and made them his slaves. (Mathews p102).

This is Saul's first major victory. He defeats Nahash and becomes King. But according to Mathews calling Saul a King was a later addition to the first Samuel. He believes that David was the first King and that Saul was the last chief. (Mathews p 109). Although Mathews has some important insights into the social world of the Old Testament more conservative scholars would disagree with His assessment that later storytellers made Saul a Chief instead of a King. But would grant that Saul was a transitional figure. Saul certainly filled the role of a chief who established Israel's first kingdom.

The Sumerian King list says that kingship is a gift from the gods and comes from heaven. (Walton p 259). In 1 Samuel Chapter 8 it's the Israelites that demand a King and God sees this as a rejection. To become King, you needed to be sponsored by a god. God chose Saul and later chose David, "a man after his own heart". The main role of a King was to rule in justice and righteousness. He was to bring peace to the land and provide for the welfare of his people, as we know from the Old Testament, there were good Kings and bad. Some followed Yahweh with all their hearts but not completely.

The concept of Messiah would come to be associated with King David. In many ways, he was the ideal King. In the future, a Messiah would come who would reestablish his Kingdom. The Royal Psalms are examples of this theology. Psalm 110 is the most quoted Psalm in the New Testament and Jesus was said to be the son of David.