

Demanding Kings in Our Lives

The Hebrew Scriptures are a narrative journey describing the relationship of a certain group of people with God and with other people. When we study these text we learn about God's nature and about human nature—especially when we are considering those books which are considered to belong to the genre of history. The events described are placed in a context which describes events also described elsewhere. Yet the perspective with which they are related is always given from a particular point of view—that of those who recognized the sovereignty of Yahweh. 1st Samuel is a book about transitions. The first passage we had from 1st Samuel last week concerned the call of the young boy Samuel to be priest in the Lord's house, to replace the branch of the Levites who were Eli's sons because of their corruption. Samuel served the Lord and the people of Israel as their priest and as their judge, deciding disputes among them as had been that role since the time of Moses. During the period when various judges settled the disputes, the people had a tendency to abandon the ways of Yahweh and worship the gods of the peoples around them, or return to worship gods brought from Egypt. The ways of Yahweh as given to the people through the instructions given at Mount Sinai and explained by Moses and later Joshua provided for relationship among people which based on justice and righteousness—on community relationships which protected even the vulnerable of the community. Yet these ways were frequently abandoned by people and their leaders. The last verse from the book of Judges which describes the situation in 1st Samuel sums it up this way: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Notice—people's behavior was based not what was right in God's eyes, but what was right in their own eyes. When we come to today's passage from 1st Samuel which begins with a gathering of the elders of Israel at Ramah where Samuel lives. Samuel, now elderly, has appointed his sons to be judges much as Eli had done. Israel's elders come to Samuel with a complaint and a demand. "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." Considering how some of the judges behaved, it was little surprise that the people would want a radical change in the way things were being done. They are voicing something that we often hear today: Things have got to change, the system is broken. The nations around them have kings so they seek to change their situation for one they see as a pattern for organized society. The image of a king in the ancient Near East was that gods created the institution of monarchy so that their will would be executed on earth through earthly rules. Kingship was instituted by the gods and descended onto humankind. This proposition brought by the elders of Israel was vastly different. This origin of kingship is rising from below—from humankind. Samuel's response to their request is framed as being displeasure. Samuel brings the issue before the Lord in prayer and although we are not given Samuel's prayer, the Lord's response indicates that Samuel is feeling grief and a sense of failure because this request by the people indicates a lack of faith in God. Samuel has led a community of faith, but despite his efforts the people, including his sons, have forsaken Yahweh and instead want to "be like the other nations." The Lord comforts Samuel and tells him to listen to the voice of the people: "for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing

to you.” From this passage, it doesn’t seem as if God is as much opposed to the idea of an monarchy as God is disturbed by the reason they give for wanting a king—to be like other nations thus rejecting God’s role as the one to whom they owed obedience. Clearly in the message that God gives to Samuel to relay to the people about the consequences of installing a king over them, God does not approve of this idea, but God allows it and gives them a warning of what the consequences will be. God tells Samuel to listen to them, thereby granting them the option, the agency to make that choice. Samuel is also told to solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” Instead of Yahweh whose rule establishes justice Samuel tells them these things about have a king like other nations over them: “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots; he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.” The predominant theme of this warning can be summed up in the phrase “he will take.” And Samuel’s warning pretty much covers every aspect of their lives—they will have nothing that cannot be take from them at the whim of this king they have placed over them. Instead of the opportunity for a true theocracy, or rule by God, the elders of Israel rather foolishly sign up for the future which is laid before them. After hearing what human kingship will mean, you would think that Israel’s elders would rethink their demand. But they don’t. And as the narrative continues, all these dire consequences do come to pass. When reading this text, the demand and the outlined consequences, I have to agree with the title to a commentary I read about this passage. The title was the author’s response to the choice made by the Israelites: “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Yet Scripture tells us that this is more the norm than the exception of the response of people when it comes to placing God in the role of king. Just as their ancestors could not imagine a life of freedom so that a whole generation died on the way to the Promised Land, this generation was unable to envision a nation led by God. It seems that humanity has always had a problem granting total trust and authority to God—beginning with Adam and Eve. And that is the most basic truth of this passage—we want to have a say in the authority structure over us—we want our king to be chosen from the bottom up—according to our will. We don’t like to submit to authority from the top down. Since we live in a country where the concept of kings ruling over us has been rejected, we might tend to think this passage has no relevance for us. We would tend to reject, not demand a king to rule this nation. Yet in many ways this passage speaks about us in the way we choose our allegiances. We may not live in a time and place where royalty exists in a institutional manner, but we do choose where we place our highest values, are most committed allegiances. In this way it seems that people are always demanding a king, and unfortunately often the king that we demand is one that makes us “like other nations and peoples”. When God’s ways are dominant over human ways, all humanity benefits for justice and mercy are the ruling precepts, not self-interest and greed. In the passage from

Mark's gospel there are many layers indicating the opposition which began early in Jesus' ministry. Presented are many claims which deny his identity and mission, but the concluding verse speaks to Jesus' view of what is foremost for those who belong to the family he creates—"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." In other words, whoever places God as sovereign in their lives belongs to him. Sometimes when we encounter claims of allegiance to God by others, we need to look to God's ways as narrated through the life of Christ to discern whether God is their first allegiance or are they doing and supporting what is right in their eyes. May we always seek God as the ruler of all we say and do. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.