

UNIT 2A: OLD TESTAMENT

35: Kings

From a Tribal Confederacy to a Monarchy

The transition of Israel from a tribal confederacy to a monarchical state based in Jerusalem occurs during the Philistine ascendancy in the Middle East. This in turn is driven by the technological revolution marked by the move from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age (about 1,200 B.C.); and it is the Philistines, who, initially, command this technology. So parlous is the inferior state of Israel's metallurgy—without ore, smelters, smiths and know-how—that she, like other nations, has to go to the Philistines to get her plough shares and swords sharpened (1 Samuel 13:19-22). Her ability now to hold on to the land depends on matching both the technology and political economy of her adversaries, especially the Philistines. The Prophet Samuel is ambivalent about these developments but he is pragmatic enough to see their necessity. Perhaps Israel's faith can still hold and prosper under these new conditions in which a king is anointed who will serve as a mediator between God and His Kingdom and the People of Israel

The rising power and reach of Israel under the successive monarchies of Saul, David and Solomon from roughly 1050 B.C. to 930 B.C. has also to be understood in the context of the lack of serious external threats once the Philistines have been dealt with. Egypt loses her grip over Palestine after the Twentieth Dynasty and 1150 BC. There are no longer any serious contenders to the North and the East. The scene is now set for a significant new chapter in Israel's history and her covenant with God.

The Rise of Saul

Our textual sources for this period are most reliably to be found in the Deuteronomic History of the books of Samuel (1 Kingdoms, 2 Kingdoms LXX) and the first 11 chapters of the first book of Kings (3 Kingdoms LXX). Within this block, the so called "succession narrative" of 2 Samuel (2 Kingdoms LXX) 9-20 and 1 Kings (3 Kingdoms LXX) 1-2 is a vivid, historically reliable and an unmatched example of the finest Hebraic prose in the whole of the Old Testament. That it should come from a time when literary traditions were developing fast in a prosperous and powerful era for Israel is no coincidence. In contrast, the accounts in 1 and 2 Chronicles from the Priestly tradition sit loose to the history and show a theological concern linked to the time of their redaction, the post exilic period of some four hundred years later. This witness will be considered in a later lecture.

It is Saul, of course, the rustic king-warrior, not yet with a central focus of power in a united kingdom, who rallies the tribes against the Philistines and wrests the technology of the Iron Age away from them for Israel's use and subsequent development. Saul, however, belonged to the old world of the tribal confederacy which was eventually to prove no match militarily against the Philistines. His final defeat at Gilboa (1 Samuel 31) testifies to that, but in many ways his decline begins, certainly mentally, when Samuel reproves him and deserts him for not sacrificing to Yahweh all the Amalekites with their goods who had been put under the "herem" or ban of holy war (1 Samuel / 1 Kingdoms 15). To a man whose confidence was built upon the election and empowerment of the Spirit of God as a Warrior-King the judgement of Samuel must have been devastating. Saul never recovered from this point personally or militarily.

The Emergence of David

The rising star of David, the young warrior who outshone Saul in the people's eyes (1 Samuel / 1 Kingdoms 18:7) and upon whom the Spirit now rested rather than himself (1 Samuel / 1 Kingdoms 16:13) must have been doubly humiliating to the king; and this explains his growing and murderous antagonism against David. So

paranoid did Saul become that he had the 85 priests of Nob slaughtered simply because they had shown David kindness (1 Samuel / 1 Kingdoms 22:9-19). His final demise at the battle of Gilboa was of course triggered by his consultation of the medium at Endor, necromancy, then as now, being strictly against God's Law (1 Samuel / 1 Kingdoms 28:8-25). Although the Deuteronomist's account has probably been coloured by David's subsequent success and prominence, the pathos and tragedy of Saul's well-intentioned but flawed campaign, reflects both his political and personal weaknesses. As far as kingship was concerned in Israel, Saul was a false start. Even if his energy and idealism were evident from the start, they did not endure.

With David, however, a new era in Israel's history truly begins. His early rise to prominence is woven into the story of Saul's decline; and as we have seen, there is an inverse relationship between the two. The well-known exploits of the slaying of Goliath are somewhat complicated by a differing account of who actually killed the giant (Elhanan: 2 Samuel / 2 Kingdoms 21:19, cf. 1 Chronicles 20:5). Furthermore, David's post as court musician, his military exploits and befriending of Jonathan, his handsome and winsome demeanour to an adoring public—all these contribute to his apotheosis as Israel's defender and future statesman, a man after God's own heart. Strikingly, Malcolm Gladwell has pointed out that "David was a slinger [a projectile warrior with a slingshot], and slingers beat infantry hands down."¹ Also, Goliath appears to be suffering from a serious medical condition—acromegaly caused by a benign tumour of the pituitary gland, which leads to excessive size and double vision. Goliath accuses David of coming to him "with sticks," yet David has only one stick (1 Samuel/1 Kingdoms 17.42). As Gladwell reflects: "In reality, the very thing that gave the giant his size was also the source of his greatest weakness. There is an important lesson in that for battles with all kinds of giants. The powerful and the strong are not always what they seem."²

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2013), p.12.

² Gladwell, pp. 14-15.

David Consolidates His Power While Obeying the Lord

After Saul's death we are shown different strengths in the man David—primarily his political shrewdness. The first five chapters of Second Samuel (2 Kingdoms) describe how much he achieved. Israel had its king, albeit initially only in the South and ruling from Hebron for some seven years. The key to David's success was his willingness to pray to the Lord and ask for direction before taking any initiative, just as he did before going to Hebron (2 Samuel/2 Kingdoms 2:1).

David knew, however, that the North had to come on board as well so that the whole tribal confederacy could be welded together as one in this great new project of nation building. David had laid the foundation for his power base in Judah by ingratiating himself with local tribal elders in the sharing of spoil taken from their enemies. The northern tribes, however, were still ruled by Saul's weak son, Ishbaal, while the true power was being exercised by his general Abner. After the successive weakening of Ishbaal's control through the incursion of David's forces, the northern tribes were eventually delivered into David's hand by Abner himself. David took Michal, a daughter of Saul to be his first wife and with this political marriage his victory was complete. He was now the undisputed king of the whole of Israel. The Philistines were then stirred into action, but David managed to push them back to the coastal plains; and from this point he was able to establish and maintain for Israel an enlarged territory stretching from Lebanon to Egypt, from the Mediterranean to the deserts of Arabia. The chronicler is very clear why this came to pass: "David became greater and greater for Yahweh, the God of hosts was with him." (2 Samuel / 2 Kingdoms 5:10).

The Rise of Jerusalem

David knew that the kingdom had to be ruled from a centre that was neither northern nor southern. The new form of governance had to rise above the tribal concerns of the old confederacy. Jerusalem—a supposedly impregnable fortress—became that centre no sooner than David's forces had taken it by ascending a water

shaft weak point. Immediately, Jerusalem became known as the “City of David.” (2 Samuel / 2 Kingdoms 5:9). The crucial transformation, however, had to wait upon the recovery of the Ark of the Covenant which had been unceremoniously removed by the Philistines upon the fall of the former national shrine at Shiloh. David recovered the sacred object and brought it to his new capital, himself leading the procession in an ecstatic dance, much to the disgust of his wife, Michal (2 Samuel / 2 Kingdoms 6).

The Ark brought the abiding presence of God into a new “tent.” Zion was now not only the City of David but the City of God. Indeed, the Ark was now installed in a new Tent of Meeting in the city, (2 Samuel / 2 Kingdoms 7:2). David’s political consolidation was, therefore, sublimely matched by his successful integration of the whole history of Israel as a covenant people with his declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of a united kingdom. To this end, he also recruited the remainder of the priesthood who had survived Saul’s bloody purge at Nob and installed them in the city to serve before the Ark. Jerusalem now, and not Shiloh, became the religious focal point of Israel; and people now made pilgrimage to the royal city, whereas once they had done so to the confederacy shrines. A number of psalms were written for this period celebrating the Entry of the Ark, notably Psalm 24:7-10 and Psalm 132:6-10. In an important sense, with the arrival of the Ark and the Lord’s presence in Jerusalem, the exodus from Egypt is now completed.

The Limitations of David’s Vision and Governance

David longed to build a Temple for the Ark as was the custom of other nations, but he acceded to Nathan’s protest that hitherto the Ark had moved about in a tent as was fitting for a pilgrim people. David recognised that this was one step too far for the more conservative forces in his kingdom. The highest achievement of the new

royal theology in the Succession Narrative of the Second Book of Samuel was to be the new covenant made between Yahweh and David's issue, (2 Samuel / 2 Kingdom 7). This was to prove of crucial importance in the subsequent history of Messianism in Israel. Indeed, in Nathan's prophecy, David would be acclaimed as a son of God, but in the sense of an adoptive relationship, not a deified monarch.

Under David's kingship, Israel saw a flowering of the arts and culture, perhaps also the true beginning of literacy amongst the city elites. However, David did occasionally overreach himself as in the disastrous debacle of the census which the people bitterly resented and in the introduction of work camps which under Solomon's reign were to become the despised symbols of tyranny. Indeed, the Deuteronomist presents a David from this period who is certainly not an over idealised figure. His domestic troubles are related with disarming frankness in 2 Samuel / 2 Kingdoms 9-20 and 1 Kings / 3 Kingdoms 1-2, the so called Court History. Prominent amongst these were his engineering of Uriah's death in the frontline in order to possess his wife Bathsheba, (a sin for which the prophet Nathan reproved him and which prompted him to write Psalm 51 [50 LXX]) and the death of his son Absalom, caught in acts of treachery and rebellion against the throne. Nonetheless, for all his weaknesses and sins, David's position as Israel's first true king and the heir and progenitor of a great promise to Israel is not compromised. Indeed, a line of grace is established here that in later centuries will burst open the narrowing confines of Israel under occupation and present to the world an anointed King, Christ whose Messianic Kingdom would be and is truly universal.

Solomon: Triumphs and Tragedies

It remained to David's son Solomon, however, to consolidate David's success and under his initially wise rule a Temple was indeed built for a nation that had last made its presence felt as far as Sheba and its Queen. Upon the death of David, Solomon, his son by Bathsheba, assumed the throne as a true dynastic monarch. With an alliance already in place with the king of Hiram and the kingdom of Assyria

as yet posing no threat, Solomon transformed Jerusalem with a Temple built for the Ark and under his rule the land continued to prosper. Solomon had great wealth but he also had wisdom from God. It was during his reign that a strong interest developed in Israel's religious life and in wisdom as a spiritual genre of edification and enlightenment. Much of the subsequent wisdom literature in the Old Testament develops from this time forward.

Less happily, Solomon was not immune from the temptations of despotism, but this could be said of any Middle Eastern potentate of the time. He unilaterally redrew the tribal boundaries of the old confederacy and instituted a system of twelve taxation districts based on them thereby rendering the old tribal system politically if not spiritually inert. He also developed David's system of enforced labour, some 30,000 Israelites being conscripted for work in modern day Lebanon, one month in every three, (1 Kings / 3 Kingdoms 5:13-18). 80,000 were put to work in the stone quarries and 70,000 toiled in other forms of manual labour. Some might have been forgiven for thinking that in Solomon Israel had created its own new Pharaoh. There was soon a revolt under Jeroboam, a northerner and work gang officer. Ahijah the prophet from the old confederate centre at Shiloh then prophesied that Yahweh would rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, leaving only the tribe of Judah (from which "Jews" derives) within the sphere of the Davidic covenant, (1 Kings / 3 Kingdoms 11:29-39).

The Deuteronomist historian recognised in his account that Solomon had found disfavour with God through his absolutism, linked to a disturbing tendency to be accommodating toward the religious needs of his foreign wives—fruits of countless political alliances with foreign nations—even offering some of these wives shrines for their own gods in the city. Here then, according to the Deuteronomist, was the reason for Solomon's decline, (his despotism relatively speaking overlooked) ... women! "When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with Yahweh his God, as was the heart of David his father." (1 Kings / 3 Kingdoms 11:4).

The syncretism for which Solomon was responsible stretched further back than this and reflected an ongoing problem of rationalised disloyalty toward Yahweh that the prophets were keen to expose. The royal theology of the Davidic covenant may itself have proved vulnerable to such influences as it became commonplace now to assume that the established order had divine approval, come what may. Later prophets were to shatter that complacency in years to come as the kingdom fell apart and as new enemies arose in the East. As Samuel had recognised, a modern state brings its own problems.

A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox Biblical interpretation ought to have a three level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, Bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:⁻¹

1 Samuel 8:1-22 [1 Kingdoms 8—Septuagint]

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
Exegetical	Historical / Contextual <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	<p>This important chapter sets out the challenge confronting God and His people as together they seek to work out governance—a system of government, a pattern of control and authority—that respects both human free will and divine guidance. Verses 10 to 18 set out the disadvantages of being ruled by a king; however, because the Israelites have rejected guidance by prophecy in general and the corrupt sons of the prophet Samuel in particular God instructs Samuel in 8:22: “Listen to [the] voice [of the people] and appoint for them a king.”</p>	<p>Rulers seeking personal gain remains a problem in all cultures. Yet the primary resolution for corruption remains the commitment to the Lord as set out in 1 Samuel 20 with each person asked to “be subject to the Lord with your whole heart” (1 Samuel 12:20). Moreover, the personal integrity of rulers is also essential for good governance.</p>
	Allegorical / Typological <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	<p>By opening with Hannah’s prayer for a child and the birth of Samuel, rather than the birth of Saul or David, 1 Kings stresses the power of personal prayer and the resulting divinely ordained human agency. The note for 1 Samuel 1:13 in <i>The Orthodox Study Bible</i> states: “St. Cyprian sees the praying Hannah as a type of the Church pouring her heart out in prayer silently and modestly, ‘within the very recesses of her heart. . with manifest faith.’”</p>	<p>A sound exegesis of this time of kingship in Israel, views prayer as central to finding and exercising God’s will in personal lives and governing the state. Orthodox tradition strongly supports this perspective as a necessary, efficacious response to living as a Christian today.</p>
Interpretative	Spiritual / Ethical	<p>Scholars debate whether the demand of the Israelite tribal confederacy for a king was due primarily to corruption of the sons of Samuel (1 Samuel 8:3), the wish “to be like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:19), or not to be governed</p>	<p>The issue of whether Israel is to be governed by the Lord or by the idolatry of the Canaanite religion and culture is strikingly similar to our</p>

		directly by the Lord Himself (8:7). The three motivations were all present.	contemporary spiritual conflict with secularism.
	Personal / Social	Because of the pervasiveness of Canaanite idolatry, when prophecy and trust in the Lord were often rejected, this period prior to the establishment of the monarchy has been characterized in Judges 17:6 as: “In those days there was no king in Israel; [so] a man would do what was good in his own eyes.” Social chaos and weak governance promotes striving for personal control.	The modern focus on individual fulfillment can easily undermine the possibility of a common good for the community. Good governance in the long-term is often not served by short-term political objectives, linked to personal gain.
Transformative	The Call to Holiness	Throughout the period of Judges and Kings, the call to holiness is a call to personal prayer for divine intervention in the life of both the individual and the society.	Exegesis and interpretation of 1 Kings 8 strongly supports sustained personal prayer as essential for holiness today.
	The Call to Witness	The individual witness of Samuel was essential for the transformation of a tribal confederacy into a strong God-fearing state.	Personal witness today remains essential for the strength and growth of the Church.

¹ In “*The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics*,” (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: **1. Exegetical** - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the Biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ...” (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). **3. Transformative** – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages. In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the Biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115f., Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.

1 Samuel 8:1-22 - New King James Version (NKJV)

8 Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel. ² The name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; *they were* judges in Beersheba. ³ But his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice.

⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵ and said to him, “Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.”

⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” So Samuel prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. ⁸ According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. ⁹ Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behaviour of the king who will reign over them.”

¹⁰ So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who asked him for a king. ¹¹ And he said, “This will be the behaviour of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint

**Septuagint (LXX)
Kings 8**

1 And it came to pass when Samuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel. 2 And these *are* the names of his sons; Joel the first-born, and the name of the second Abia, judges in Bersabee. 3 And his sons did not walk in his way; and they turned aside after gain, and took gifts, and perverted judgments. 4 And the men of Israel gather themselves together, and come to Armathaim to Samuel, 5 and they said to him, Behold, thou art grown old, and thy sons walk not in thy way; and now set over us a king to judge us, as also the other nations *have*. 6 And the thing *was* evil in the eyes of Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us: and Samuel prayed to the Lord. 7 And the Lord said to Samuel, Hear the voice of the people, in whatever they shall say to thee; for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me from reigning over them. 8 According to all their doings which they have done to me, from the day that I brought them out of Egypt until this day, even *as* they have deserted me, and served other gods, so they do also to thee. 9 And now hearken to their voice; only thou shalt solemnly testify to them, and thou shalt *describe to them the †manner of the king who shall reign over them. 10 And Samuel spoke every word of the Lord to the people who asked of him a king. 11 And he said, This shall be the ‡manner of the king that shall rule over you: he shall take your sons, and put them in his

them for his own chariots and *to be* his horsemen, and *some* will run before his chariots. ¹² He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, *will set some* to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and *some* to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots.

¹³ He will take your daughters *to be* perfumers, cooks, and bakers. ¹⁴ And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give *them* to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and give it to his officers and servants. ¹⁶ And he will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men,^[a] and your donkeys, and put *them* to his work. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants. ¹⁸ And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day.”

¹⁹ Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, “No, but we will have a king over us, ²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

²¹ And Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he repeated them in the hearing of the LORD. ²² So the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed their voice, and make them a king.”

And Samuel said to the men of Israel, “Every man go to his city.”

chariots, and among his horsemen, and running before his chariots, ¹² and *his manner shall be* to make them to himself captains of hundreds and captains of thousands; and to reap his harvest, and gather his vintage, and prepare his instruments of war, and the implements of his chariots. ¹³ And he will take your daughters to be perfumers, and cooks, and bakers.

¹⁴ And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your good olive yards, and give them to his servants.

¹⁵ And he will take the tithe of your seeds and your vineyards, and give *it* to his eunuchs, and to his servants. ¹⁶ And he will take your servants, and your handmaids, and your good herds and your asses, and will take the tenth of them for his works. ¹⁷ And he will tithe your flocks; and ye shall be his servants. ¹⁸ And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king whom ye have chosen to yourselves, and the Lord shall not hear you in those days, because ye have chosen to yourselves a king.

¹⁹ But the people would not hearken to Samuel; and they said to him, Nay, but there shall be a king over us. ²⁰ And we also will be like all the nations; and our king shall judge us, and shall go out before us, and fight our battles. ²¹ And Samuel heard all the words of the people, and spoke them in the ears of the Lord. ²² And the Lord said to Samuel, “hearken to their voice, and appoint them a king.” And Samuel said to the men of Israel, Let each man depart to his city.