

KINGSHIP IN THE DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY:
A COHERENT PRESENTATION
OF CRITICAL PASSAGES

A Term Paper

Presented to Dr. Philip McMillion

Harding Graduate School of Religion

Memphis, Tennessee

As a Requirement in

Course 5001

Introduction to the Old Testament

by

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December 2004

This paper will demonstrate that the Deuteronomistic History¹ presents a coherent theological portrayal of kingship. Deuteronomistic History is a rather loaded concept, both theoretical and widely assumed. The appeal of DH for our purpose is its unity, which is the foundation of the theory. Undeniably, source critical studies have made major contributions to the understanding of kingship through examination of possible redactional layers in the DH. The intention here, however, in keeping with G. E. Gerbrandt, is to “examine the final product.”² In this way we will seek to understand kingship from the perspective of the DH rather than from that of a hypothetically characterized Deuteronomistic Historian³ or other redactor(s).

This is not to deny the existence of a Dtr. It is assumed that there must be some unifying agent behind the DH, but the emphasis of this study is the unity, not the agent or his sources. Thus we agree with D. J. McCarthy who says (in reference to 1 Sam. 8-12) that focus on the “supposed” pro- and anti-monarchical sources has detracted from recognition of the narrative

¹The Deuteronomistic History in this paper refers to the entire body of literature encompassed by Deuteronomy through 2 Kings. It will be referred to throughout this paper as the DH. The scope of this paper is not such that it can examine kingship throughout the entire Deuteronomistic History. Focus will be given instead to Deut. 17:14-20, Judg. 8:22-23; 9; 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25, and 1 Sam. 8-12. The broader context of the Deuteronomistic History, however, will be in view all the while.

²Gerald Eddie Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History*, SBL Dissertation Series 87 (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1987), 43.

³The Deuteronomistic Historian, also called the Deuteronomist, will be referred to in this paper as the Dtr.

unit.⁴ A. D. H. Mayes, while considering McCarthy's analysis valid, maintains that Wellhausen's "classical" pro- and anti- monarchical source divisions⁵ are not to be ignored.⁶ Nonetheless, he proposes that it is "the deuteronomist who is solving the theological problems posed by the rise of the monarchy."⁷

In another work Mayes notes that the Dtr was dealing equally with both attitudes toward monarchy.⁸ This of course begs the question of the Dtr's role in the editorial process, but again, the emphasis must fall on the present DH. R. Polzin caricatures the typical approach in order to demonstrate how "such literary-historical constructions do not seriously deal with the *real text* in its intricacy and literary sophistication."⁹ S. L. McKenzie points out that there is a tendency, rooted in Wellhausen and later Noth, to assume an antimonarchical ideology for the Dtr when approaching 1 Samuel 8-12.¹⁰ He seems right in asserting that it is preferable to forego the assumption and let the text speak for itself.

⁵Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, 2^d ed. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973; reprint, Meridian Books Library Edition, 1957), 245-72.

⁶A. D. H. Mayes, "The Rise of the Israelite Monarchy," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1978): 2-4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

⁸A. D. H. Mayes, *The Story of Israel Between Settlement and Exile: A Redactional Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 99.

⁹Robert Polzin, "The Monarchy Begins: 1 Samuel 8-10," *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers*, 26: 127.

¹⁰Steven L. McKenzie, "The Trouble with Kingship," in *Israel Constructs Its History*, ed. Albert de Pury, Thomas Romer, and Jean-Daniel Macchi, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 306 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2000), 301.

J. J. M. Roberts is correct when he says, “If one takes canon seriously as an important factor in theological debate, then it must be significant that the voices of the promonarchists were not erased from the biblical record in the editing process.”¹¹ Thus, the biblical texts contain both pro- and anti-monarchical elements. The question that remains, then, is how the DH, containing both, coherently conceives of kingship.

First, in Deut. 17:14-20,¹² the question immediately arises as to whether “the law of the king” is a later addition or the basis of what follows. As the DH presents kingship, Deuteronomy 17 comes first, however, and Deut. 17:14-20 is not expressly pro- or anti-monarchical. On the surface, it seems sensible that because God is making provision for the monarchy, then the passage must be pro-monarchical. Roberts notes, “The law of the king . . . contains no trace of the notion that the appointment of a human king implies the rejection of Yahweh as Israel’s king.”¹³

Contrary to a pro-monarchical position, B. M. Levinson demonstrates how limiting the “law of the king” actually was in comparison to other Near Eastern ideas of kingship.¹⁴ Moreover, he highlights that no other parts of Deuteronomy envision a role for the king, even

¹¹J. J. M. Roberts, “In Defense of the Monarchy: The Contribution of Israelite Kingship to Biblical Theology,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 380.

¹²All biblical references in this paper will be cited from *The Holy Bible; New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

¹³*Ibid.*, 381.

¹⁴Bernard M. Levinson, “The Reconceptualization of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History’s Transformation of Torah,” *Vetus Testamentum* 51 (2001): 524; P. Dutcher-Wallis also shows this, but with a late-redaction perspective that is not useful to this study. The limits on Israelite kingship are made clear nonetheless. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, “The Circumscription of the King: Deuteronomy 17:16-17 In Its Ancient Social Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002): 601-616.

where one would expect royal involvement.¹⁵ Similarly, W. Dietrich pointedly states, “He who wants kings only in the context envisaged here in fact does not want kings.”¹⁶ P. C. Craigie also sees the terms of Near Eastern kingship, which would be the natural model, as limited by the theocratic ideal of Israel.¹⁷

Those who hold a late-redaction view often see Deut. 17:14-20 as confirmation of the anti-monarchical bias of the Dtr because of its theocratic emphasis and limitation of the king.¹⁸ Though their source critical conclusion is unnecessary, the analysis still serves as evidence of the function of “the law of the king”: when Israel asks for a king “like the other nations” (Deut. 17:14), she should realize that her king is *not* to be like the kings of the other nations.

In 1 Samuel 8:5 Israel finally makes that request. The connection between 1 Samuel 8:11-17 and Deut. 17:14-20 seems apparent. In effect, the 1 Samuel passage describes precisely the opposite of what Deuteronomy envisions. Israel is asking, not for God’s will revealed in Deuteronomy 17, but for a king like the other nations.

B. C. Birch says, “The description of vv. 11-17 is of pagan kingship similar to that which

¹⁵Levinson, 529.

¹⁶Walter Dietrich, “History and Law: Deuteronomistic Historiography and Deuteronomic Law Exemplified in the Passage from the Period of the Judges to the Monarchical Period,” In *Israel Constructs Its History*, ed. Albert de Pury, Thomas Romer, and Jean-Daniel Macchi, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 306 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2000), 342.

¹⁷Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 253-254.

¹⁸E.g., S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 209-213; Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 118-120.

is prohibited in Deuteronomy 17:14ff.”¹⁹ H. W. Hertzberg confirms the list’s relationship to Near Eastern models of kingship.²⁰

Dietrich performs a revealing analysis of the subtle differences between Deut. 17:14b and 1 Samuel 8:5. He shows that even the request in 1 Samuel is negatively composed in contrast to the request anticipated in Deuteronomy 17. His observations are dependent on a synchronic view of the two texts’ origin, but whether or not his nuancing is accurate, he is surely correct to observe, “So it is from the formulation of the Law that the description of the historical development sustains a sudden deep shadow.”²¹

In this way, 1 Sam. 8:11-17 serves to confirm what exactly the people are asking for—a king other than that of Deuteronomy 17. Hence their stubborn-sounding reaffirmation after Samuel’s warning: “‘No!’ they said. ‘We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations . . .’” (vv. 19b-20a). Levinson sees this as a request to “erase Israel’s religious and political identity.”²²

W. Brueggemann asserts that vv. 11-17 are nothing more than a statement of fact.²³ This coincides well with the text’s depiction of God as warning them of the implications of their

¹⁹Bruce C. Birch, *The Rise of the Israelite Monarchy*, SBL Dissertation Series, 27 (Missoula: Scholar Press, 1976), 29.

²⁰Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, trans. J. S. Bowden, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: SCM Press Ltd, 1964), 73. Contra Thomas R. Preston, “The Heroism of Saul: Patterns of Meaning in the Narrative of the Early Kingship,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24 (October 1982): 31.

²¹Dietrich, 323.

²²Levinson, 518.

²³Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 64.

request (v. 9). Furthering the thought, M. A. O'Brien says, "within the context of DtrH, 1 Sam 8:11-17 is not anti-monarchical as such, but only against the sort of king demanded by the people; namely one like all the nations."

Be that as it may, Samuel is displeased (v. 6), though possibly for personal reasons,²⁴ and God is rejected as their king (v. 7). It appears that two issues are at stake here. First, Israel should not reject God as her king. Second, if she does, she should obey the provisional law of Deut. 17:14-20. The latter may have seemed an unappealing choice, but perhaps that was its purpose--to discourage the option for a human king. 1 Samuel 8 depicts Israel as both discontent with God as her king and disinterested in the impotent version of kingship found in Deuteronomy 17.

Nonetheless, three times in 1 Samuel 8 God tells Samuel to listen to Israel's request (vv. 7,9,22). The presence of rejection and permission creates the tension between pro- and anti-monarchical sentiments in 1 Samuel 8-12. R. E. Clements ascribes this tension, not to the rejection motif, but to the unfavorable depiction in vv. 11-17. Furthermore, he sees the tension as secondarily enhanced by Saul's anointing in 1 Sam. 9:1-10:16.²⁵ His understanding of why the Dtr has left the tension is determined by his thesis: "Davidic kings were acceptable to Yahweh, other kings were not."²⁶

Hence, the Dtr resolves the tension by placing blame on other kings, most expressly

²⁴Dietrich, 324; Polzin, 125; Preston, 33-34; Roberts, 382.

²⁵R. E. Clements, "The Deuteronomistic Interpretation of the Founding of the Monarchy in I Sam. VIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (October 1974): 399.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 409.

Solomon,²⁷ but room is left for “the divine promise and hope which they attach to the Davidic dynasty.”²⁸ There are others, of course, who through a late-redactional presupposition also connect vv. 11-17 with the reign of Solomon. As we have already demonstrated, however, there is good reason so see it in light of Near Eastern kingship.

Even so, Clements raises a valuable question concerning election. He strengthens his claim by returning again to Deuteronomy 17, proposing that divine election is key as evidenced by the phrase “be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses” (Deut. 17:15).²⁹ This begs the question of why, then, Saul was anointed by God, which Clements does not address. He simply says that, for the Dtr, Saul’s kingship was “the result of a hasty and ill-timed request.”³⁰ Why that request was granted is untold.

Regarding election, Dietrich also notes that Deut. 17:15 instructs that the king be chosen by God, but 1 Sam. 8:18 says, “When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king *you* have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day” (italics mine). His reasoning, as follows, is helpful. The monarchy is Israel’s choice, thus the “king you have chosen” means the “*kingship* you have chosen.” The particular monarch is God’s choice, thus the king they are to appoint is the individual God has chosen.³¹

This is a clearer picture of election than Levinson presents and corresponds with what has been demonstrated so far, but the tension has yet to be reconciled. Why has Yahweh allowed the

²⁷Ibid., 403-404.

²⁸Ibid., 401.

²⁹Ibid., 409.

³⁰Ibid., 407.

³¹Dietrich, 328.

kingship if it constitutes his rejection? Furthermore, why has he elected Saul, when he will ultimately have to say, “I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions” (1 Sam. 15:11)? Saul is hardly the epitome of a “good king.”

Birch calls the tension in chapter 8 the “‘sinful-but-still-of-God’ view of kingship.”³² He sees some resolution in chapter 10. 1 Sam. 10:19 shows that for the Dtr, although Saul has been anointed, received the Spirit, and prophesied, Israel’s rejection of God is not forgotten. Birch says, “But the accusation is not followed by an announcement of judgment but by God’s act of grace in choosing a king for Israel.”³³ Again, “There is indeed a judgment implied in vs. 19a, but it is against the people and not the kingship.”³⁴

Two important points surface from these observations. First, the anti-monarchical sentiment would be better described as *anti-rejection*. The issue is the rejection of God as monarch, but the monarchy exists--it belongs to God. The problem is Israel’s plebiscite against God in favor of a human king. McKenzie accurately concludes, “The people’s request for a king was a sin, because it showed their lack of faith in YHWH. But 1 Samuel 8-12 never says that kingship itself is sinful.”³⁵

Second, in keeping with the existence of the “law of the king,” the pro-monarchical sentiment would be better described as the *concessive* sentiment. Going beyond McCarter

³²Birch, *The Rise*, 27.

³³Bruce C. Birch, “Choosing of Saul at Mizpah,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (October 1975): 456.

³⁴Birch, *The Rise*, 51.

³⁵McKenzie, 308.

though, who simply describes the “divine sanctioning” as “backhanded,”³⁶ we agree with Birch that choosing Saul is an act of grace. Why did he allow a human king despite the sinfulness of Israel’s request? Why did he choose the sinful Saul? It might also be asked why he chose rebellious Israel and allowed so many sinful choices, only to work for her salvation afterward. The Deuteronomistic History is just that, a history, which portrays God’s salvation acts through time.

McKenzie affirms that, “the establishment of the monarchy appears as the latest of YHWH’s *heilsgeschichtliche* deeds.”³⁷ It appears that in this, M. Noth was correct:

In chapter 12 Dtr. makes Samuel’s primary message to the people the assurance that despite their ungodly demand for a king, they can still choose between obedience and disobedience and thus between preservation and annihilation--i.e., that despite the institution of the monarchy things can remain as they were before.”³⁸

McCarthy also sees “a final resolution in chapter 12 where, with sin acknowledged and repented, kingship can be accepted into ongoing salvation history.”³⁹

At this point it is necessary to travel backward on the DH’s timeline and consider the period between the “law of the king” and the institution of the human monarchy. The book of Judges is typically thought to be pro-monarchical by inference,⁴⁰ because of the anarchical tenor

³⁶P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *I Samuel*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 8 (Garden City, NY: 1980), 162.

³⁷McKenzie, 308.

³⁸Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, trans. David J.A. Clines, et al, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 15 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1981), 51.

³⁹McCarthy, 404.

⁴⁰Arthur Ernest Cundall, “Judges: An Apology for Monarchy?” *Expository Times* 81 (1970): 180.

of the book and in light of the thematic statement that “Israel had no king” (Jdg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).⁴¹ This is despite the anti-monarchical elements thought to be in the Gideon and Abimelech stories (Jdg. 8:22-23; 9). Equally, though, the reader infers from the prolonged period of judgeship that the historical situation was that of a nation not interested in kingship.⁴²

Gerbrandt admits that Jdg. 8:22-23 contains anti-monarchical sentiment and concludes:

There is thus no reason to deny that very early, probably already before the time of kingship . . . there were those who argued that Israel’s allegiance to Yahweh precluded the possibility of a human king. Jdg 8:22 contains memories of such opposition to kingship.⁴³

He argues, however, that the character of Gideon was exceptional--painting a positive picture of judgeship--whereas Abimelech typifies the downward spiral of leadership in Judges 17-21, which sets up for the monarchy.⁴⁴ The Abimelech story, more specifically the Jotham Fable (Jdg. 9:7-21), has classically been seen as anti-monarchical,⁴⁵ but like Gerbrandt some have taken it as pointedly anti-Abimelech instead.⁴⁶

E. H. Maly attempts to demonstrate just that but concedes that the story would not have created positive thinking toward the institution. That is exactly how one would be expected to take the story when reading the DH. Opposite to Gerbrandt’s view, there is no reason to think that the Dtr would have expected his readers to be very excited about the prospect of monarchy

⁴¹Dietrich, 317.

⁴²Ibid., 178.

⁴³Gerbrandt, 126-27.

⁴⁴Ibid., 133-34.

⁴⁵J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 117.

⁴⁶E.g., George Foot Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 245-46.

after reading the Abimelech story.

Yet, Dietrich maintains, “it is precisely to the extent that the judges are less and less able to respond to the demands of the Torah that they prepare the transition towards the monarchy.”⁴⁷ This may be reflected in 1 Sam. 8:1-5a.⁴⁸ On the other hand, kings “like the other nations” are not likely to respond to the demands of the Torah--the point of 1 Sam. 8:11-17. In addition, the request itself fails to conform to the Torah, as demonstrated above. Moreover, 1 Sam. 8:20 and 12:12 both indicate the true motivation was a desire for military protection,⁴⁹ something that God had unfailingly provided through the judges.

That Israel’s request had more to do with lack of faith in Yahweh and desire to conform to surrounding influences is clear. Noth’s observes that there is no difference between the functions of judge and king other than how long one performs the function and at whose discretion--the king at his own or the judge at God’s.⁵⁰ D. Launderville similarly says that king and judge alike carry out two basic functions: defending against foes and maintaining justice. Yet, the king introduces two new items: a standing army and a bureaucracy.⁵¹ Essentially, though, the issue is this: “Under the judgeship the Lord would have greater latitude in choosing when, where, and through whom to intervene to defend the nation and maintain justice.”⁵²

⁴⁷Dietrich, 321.

⁴⁸Mayes, “The Rise,” 11.

⁴⁹Preston, 30.

⁵⁰Noth, 49.

⁵¹Dale Launderville, “Anti-monarchical Ideology in Israel in Light of Mesopotamian Parallels,” in *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature*, ed. Lawrence Boadt and Mark S. Smith, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series, 32 (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2001), 126.

⁵²Ibid.

Finally, is this the anti-monarchical picture painted by the Dtr, or are the verses in Judges 17-21 truly pro-monarchical, as is typically thought? We reassert here the need to read the DH on its own terms, without presupposing the motives of the Dtr. Unless one assumes an apologetic agenda in the text, there are other possibilities for interpreting “In those days Israel had no king, everyone did as he saw fit.”

Moore espouses a somewhat neutral interpretation when he claims that the formula explains why lawless actions were unaddressed.⁵³ While the benefit of a king in such a situation is undeniable, Moore is at least not requiring an apologetic function from the words. It opens the possibility that these verses are a simple statement of fact, especially 18:1 and 19:1, which lack the implicitly moral second clause of 17:6 and 21:25.

It is precisely because of that moral statement, however, that we propose a different interpretation. D. M. Howard mentions, in his review of Gerbrandt’s book, the possibility that “no king in Israel” might refer to God. He rejects the notion, stating:

However, nothing in the book clearly makes this point. In fact, the nearest statement in the book to YHWH’s reigning uses *masal* (8:22-23), and not *malak* or *melek*; the latter are used only with reference to a human king, which would lend credence to the majority view.⁵⁴

One is left to wonder how near a statement must be in order to qualify as evidence or how explicit the point. The most convincing evidence is this: there is no reason that “no king in Israel” could not refer to God, and God’s kingship *is* clearly referred to in the context of the DH.

⁵³Moore, 369.

⁵⁴David M. Howard, “The Case of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (Spring 1990): 111.

It is not possible that the Dtr was oblivious to the theological implications of 1 Samuel 8-12 for Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1 and 21:25. Also, the practical reality of Yahweh's theocracy is apparent during the time of the judges.⁵⁵ Furthermore, "everyone did as he saw fit," if taken as a moral statement, has nothing to do with a human king, and everything to do with the reign of God in the lives of the Israelite people. In the final analysis of kingship in Judges, von Rad's conclusion seems best:

For the Deuteronomist's way of thinking, Israel stopped allowing Jahweh to bear rule over her when the monarchy came into being (Jg. viii. 23), but to his mind the institution of the judges still left room for this sovereignty of Jahweh over Israel.⁵⁶

The DH, then, presents a coherent understanding of kingship. God, from Israel's beginning, was her king. The Torah anticipated the people's rebellious tendency, and through legislation worked to dissuade and safeguard them from adopting a king "like the other nations." As the time of the judges drew to a close, though, the DH portrays a people who had already forsaken Yahweh as their king. Then, when Israel stubbornly and faithlessly demanded the prohibited kind of king, God warned them but granted their request. After they realized their sin in rejecting God as king, God forgave them and, incredibly, incorporated the kingship into salvation history.

⁵⁵Theodore P. Townsend, "The Kingdom of God as a Reality: Israel in the Time of the Judges," *Indian Journal of Theology* 32 (January-June 1983): 19-36.

⁵⁶Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker. Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 332.

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