

**May 16, 2010**

The Sunday After the Ascension

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

In biblical historiography few subjects are more ambivalent than Israel's adoption of monarchy toward the end of the eleventh century. Notwithstanding a growing impulse for this form of polity at the time, resistance against it ran deep in the culture and tribal loyalties of the people. The chief spokesman for the resistance was none other than the last of Israel's "Judges," Samuel, to whom it ironically fell to anoint the people's first kings: Saul and David.

Two reasons supported Samuel's opposition to the monarchy: First, its proposed adoption was difficult to reconcile with the theological principle that the Lord himself was Israel's king (1 Samuel 8:7; 10:19; 12:12). The true kingship was theocracy. Second, royal government would oppress the people with capricious and onerous demands (8:11-18). It was a social evil.

Samuel was divinely directed, nonetheless, to accede to Israel's demand for a king (8:22), and the Lord himself made the choice (9:16; 10:24; 11:6; 12:13).

It is significant that Israel's first two kings arose from Benjamin (Saul) and Judah (David), the central and southern tribes, because opposition to the monarchy was strongest in the north. Even three centuries later Hosea, a northern prophet, bemoaned that decision to have a king. Referring to the city where the Israelites elected Saul (1 Samuel 11:15), Hosea proclaimed the Lord's judgment: "All their wickedness was in Gilgal, for there I hated them" (9:15). The whole business of the throne was rotten at the core: "They set up kings, but not by Me; They made princes, but I gave no consent" (8:4).

Hosea's lament testifies that early doubts about the monarchy were settled by neither its adoption nor its subsequent history. Samuel's initial objections, far from being dispelled by actual experience, proved to be prophetic of future evils; the oppressions he foretold came to be understood as veritable depictions of Solomon's policies, taxation, public works, and governmental organization.

Again, how does one reconcile the Bible's contradictory assessments of what happened at Jabesh Gilead? In 1 Samuel 11, Saul's deliverance of the besieged city---an event leading to his acclamation as king---is ascribed to "the Spirit of God" (11:6), while in the following chapter the entire incident is treated as yet another occasion of Israel's infidelity (12:12).

All in all, however, this voice of dissent is heard in the Bible's historical books only as a subterranean rumble, running deep beneath the prevailing

acclamation of the kingship as one of the Lord's choicest blessings. Indeed, starting with the prophetic selection of Judah near the end of Genesis (49:8-12), the Bible's preponderant historical voice---bolstered by the poetry of Isaiah and the Psalms---finds its dominant chords on the theme of the divine covenant with the Davidic throne.

It is a fact of incalculable irony that the Bible's historical voice comes to us through those exilic and post-exilic editors who put the Old Testament history into its final and canonical form. It is no easy task of the biblical historian to understand how those writers reconciled in their minds a sustained sympathy---no, enthusiasm!---for the royal house of David with an undeniable historical fact, which they openly acknowledged: the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile came about by reason of the bad rule of the Davidic kings. Even the Chronicler, slightly later---notwithstanding his ardor for the person of David---could count the good kings of Judah on the fingers of one hand.

During the centuries immediately prior to the Incarnation, of course, theological reflection on Israel's royal heritage gave rise to the Messianism prevalent at the time of Jesus. Everyone acknowledges the debt of the Gospel to that Messianism.

It is no slight to the Gospel or the Messiah, nonetheless, to remark that the biblical kingship, considered solely as a datum of Israel's political history, remains a great enigma. Holy Scripture summons little effort to reconcile its own contradictory opinions on the subject. In spite of the theological significance of the covenant with David, Hosea's negative judgment of the royal houses was allowed to stand.

So, in the end, did the decision for a monarchy represent moral infidelity, or God's concession to an unavoidable evil, or divine blessing? Well . . . hmm, yes.

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