

Explore the Bible: King?

June 8, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for June 26 focuses on 1 Samuel 8.*

Here we go again (1 Samuel 8:1-3)

One of the things that sets biblical faith apart from other religions is the belief that history does not move in cycles. Many Eastern religions hold some form of this view, and many of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers believed and taught some version of the idea history endlessly repeats itself. Scripture is clear: History is not a circle. The beginning and the “end” are acts of God, and he continues to act in history.

That being said, it is easy to understand why looking at Israel in the period of the judges might make you doubt that history wasn't an endlessly repeating circle. The book of Judges records a pattern of idolatry, oppression, repentance and deliverance. Similarly, the opening chapters of 1 Samuel record a pattern of a faithful father having unfaithful sons. Eli was a faithful priest whose sons disgraced the priesthood. Samuel had been a faithful judge for a generation, and his sons disgraced the role of judge. The one-sentence summary of their lives could not be more damning for the role they were given and the heritage they received. As in Eli's day, the failure of the next generation sparks a national crisis. Yet instead of turning to Yahweh, as Israel has done in the better parts of their pattern, they turned instead in a new direction.

Losing the plot (1 Samuel 8:4-9)

Israel faced an uncertain future. The three conversation partners in this chapter—the elders of Israel, Samuel and Yahweh—all looked in different directions to understand their situation and determine what to do next.

The elders looked around them at the other nations. They saw the nations had entrusted their future to a king. The elders provided no other explanation at this point, beyond the fact that “all the other nations” have one. You can almost hear the echo of children and teenagers saying, “Everyone else is doing it!” But the complaint was not voiced by the youth of Israel, but by elders who were old enough to know better. Most of us know the stereotypical parental response to the “everyone else is doing it” appeal: “And if everyone was jumping off a cliff, would you do that, too?” As we will see, Israel received a version of this question and gave a definite answer.

Samuel looked to Yahweh. He alone among the elders relied on prayer in the face of an uncertain future. Samuel offered no objection to the elders’ critique of his sons. Their actions were indefensible. The request for a king displeased him, though again no specific reason was given. Samuel had been consistently portrayed as seeking Yahweh’s will, however, and the most likely reason for his disapproval was he knew already this was not Yahweh’s desire for Israel.

In his communication with Samuel, Yahweh looked to the past and saw the pattern of idolatry and forsaking that Israel had engaged in. Yahweh unequivocally said he had been rejected as king— and that was nothing new! From the day he first rescued them from slavery, this had been their go-to sin. Yahweh likely had in mind the incident of the golden calf, and the grumbling in the desert by Israel that perhaps Egypt wasn’t so bad after all. The last time Israel had a king, it was Pharaoh.

Interestingly, Yahweh told Samuel to “listen to them, but warn them.” Yahweh recognized the pattern from the past, but wanted them to reckon with the future. Yahweh’s call back to the exodus was also a direct critique of the only reason given so far for Israel wanting a king. Yahweh chose and saved Israel specifically so they would *not* be like the other nations. They would be distinct in worship and in the exercise of justice. Their national

identity would be covenantal, not based on the royal family. Israel was rejecting Yahweh as king, and so rejecting the very thing for which Yahweh had called and delivered them.

All take and no give (1 Samuel 8:10-18)

Walter Brueggemann points out that the most common word used in Samuel's warning to describe the actions of the potential king of Israel is "take." The list is exhaustive and explicit. The king will take their sons in a military draft, take their daughters to be household servants in his palace, take a tenth of all their produce and livestock for his entourage and accumulation of personal wealth, and finally take the Israelites themselves to be slaves. Whoever the new king is, whatever dynasty rules them, the Israel will ultimately find themselves in the same place as with the old king—Pharaoh. Most alarmingly, Yahweh informs them when that day comes and they cry out for deliverance like they did against Pharaoh, this time Yahweh will not answer. This prophecy was fulfilled at the terrible time of Israel's exile. Although there occasionally will be good kings over Israel, this is a decisive step in Israel's history toward chronic and entrenched unfaithfulness to Yahweh and therefore toward exile. It will be Israel's kings who perpetually lead them toward idolatry and away from justice.

Misplaced trust (1 Samuel 8:19-22)

Faced with Yahweh's version of "If everyone was jumping off a cliff, would you do that, too?" the elders of Israel respond with their version of an enthusiastic "Yes!" They repeat the desire to be like the other nations, but now expand their reasoning. They seem not to have heard or acknowledged all the things the king will "take," and instead imagine the king will "lead," "go out before us" and "fight." In this way, they have forgotten their history with Yahweh and disregarded his command for the future. "When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the LORD your God, who

brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you" (Deuteronomy 20:1).

With this response from the elders, Samuel again turns to Yahweh. Yahweh does not repeat his warning but gives permission without approval. Samuel abruptly sends everyone home, with no other word about what happens next. From Israel's perspective, the future is just as uncertain as it ever had been. The choice of a king seems to have been left to Samuel, but later chapters make clear that Yahweh will, of course, continue to be involved in his people's lives and history—even when they have rejected him (1 Samuel 9:15-17).

In case you have been hiding under a rock the past year, it is election season. Presidents are not kings (thank God), but the people of God continually must wrestle with where we place our trust during times when the future is uncertain. We serve a God who has acted decisively in history and established his Son as King of kings and Lord of lords. We must not fall victim to idolatry, turn away from justice, and lose the plot of God's work in past and his goals for the future.