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Kingship in Israel and its Implications for the Lordship of Christ Today

by Hugh J. Blair

Professor Blair prepared this paper originally as the public lecture delivered annually at the opening of the session of the Theological Hall of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. It was repeated as the 1974 Annual Public Lecture of Belfast Bible College, and we are glad to give it still wider currency in our pages.

ONE of the exegetical problems of the Old Testament is to reconcile the apparently conflicting attitudes to kingship that are found in I Samuel 8-10. When the people asked for "a king to judge us like all the nations" Samuel denounced their request as rebellion against God. And yet in the following chapters we find him quite willing to anoint Saul as king over Israel and to arrange for his election and acceptance by the people. Liberal criticism solves the difficulty characteristically by postulating two divergent sources for the account given in I Samuel—one favouring the monarchy, and the other, much later, bitterly opposed to it, reflecting the realization of what kingship had turned out to be. This purely subjective analysis has no basis in fact, and ignores the clear statement that Samuel was opposed to the suggestion that Israel should have a king "like all the nations." It is significant that while the people wanted a *king*, a ruler, Samuel was instructed to anoint Saul and subsequently David as a *captain*, or military leader of the people: the Hebrew words used have quite different connotations. Archaeology has shown that when Samuel gave his detailed and alarming picture of the kind of king that Israel might find themselves saddled with, he was depicting exactly the powers which earlier and contemporary Canaanite kings possessed. Military conscription, requisitioning of property, crippling taxation and forced labour had all been characteristic of kingship among Israel's neighbours for centuries before Samuel.

The whole point at issue was not whether or not Israel should have a king—long before, Moses had foreseen the monarchy in Israel and God had laid down guide-lines for it—but what kind of king he should be. The choice before Israel was a critical one—the choice between a divinely appointed and spiritually endowed leader under God and a secular, politically motivated king.

The same choice has confronted the people of God in all ages, and faces the church today in its application of the principle of the Lordship of Christ. I believe that Christ's kingdom is an essentially spiritual kingdom: while His Lordship has implications, personal, social and political, in every realm of life, we begin at the wrong end if we concentrate on these first of all. For the establishment of His kingdom "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds" (II Cor. 10: 4).

It is my contention that Israel failed in so far as she sought earthly power and political influence, and succeeded only in so far as she realized her divine destiny of being "a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." The Church's failure or success today in her proclamation of the Lordship of Christ will be similarly determined.

It is significant that the early kings of Israel, like the judges before them, had charismatic endowments, that is, they were supernaturally equipped with special spiritual gifts for their task. When the newly-anointed Saul left Samuel, a company of prophets met him, "and the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them" (I Samuel 10: 10). His early achievements were manifestly the work of a spiritually endowed man (I Samuel 11: 6). When David was anointed king, we are told that "the Spirit of the Lord came upon David . . . but the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul" (I Samuel 16: 13, 14). When he was anointed by the people in Hebron, he was designated as "a captain over Israel" (II Samuel 5: 2), and again and again he gave evidence of spiritual endowment for his task. Though John Bright in his *History of Israel* maintains that Solomon "could not even claim the fiction of charismatic gifts," it is possible to think of his special gift of wisdom bestowed at Gibeon as a spiritual endowment for the work of ruling Israel: his wisdom was manifestly the fruit of divine inspiration.

All these kings, in some measure at least, accepted the spiritual nature of their office: in this, let it be noted in passing, they pre-figured Christ to whom God gave the Spirit, but not by measure (John 3: 34). But in so far as they substituted political ambition for spiritual endowment they failed. The tragedy of Saul began when he saw himself not as God's divinely designated leader but as an autocratic king, free to make his own decisions and to act on his own initiative and to go his own way. It was then that the Spirit of the Lord departed from him. (Did his consulting of the witch of Endor represent a pathetically futile and carnal attempt to harness the charismatic gift again for his own ends?)

David's reign was always looked back to as an exemplary manifestation of the theocracy in action. Here was the man after God's own heart ruling as God's representative over God's people. And prophecy looked forward to the coming of a King, who should be, as

David was, a man upon whom God had put His Spirit (Isaiah 42: 1), a leader and commander of the people (Isaiah 55: 4). But there is one scene near the end of David's reign which revealed tragic failure—not his sin with Bathsheba, but his sin of numbering the people (II Samuel 24: 2 ff.), which brought down upon him and his people the terrible punishment of God. Here was David, as Joab, his commander-in-chief, saw so clearly, thinking of his kingdom as a powerful political force, and endeavouring to assess its potential as a kingdom of this world (II Samuel 24: 3, 9). It was for that that God's judgment came down inexorably upon him. It is perhaps not without significance that on the very site where the angel of God's visitation was stayed, the Temple was built, as a permanent reminder of Jerusalem's position not as a political capital but as the spiritual capital of God's nation, a kingdom of priests.

Solomon's reign saw the beginning of Israel's decline from a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, to an earthly empire. Great though that empire was in Solomon's day, with its material wealth, its international trade and its political influence, it was no more than a massive monument to Israel's rejection of her high destiny. Solomon's multiplication of foreign wives was not merely a breach of God's prohibition of marriages with the heathen; it was part of his policy of political alliances with the nations round about him, and as such was a repudiation of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. For that, God said that the kingdom would be rent from his son (I Kings 11: 11, 12): Solomon's political kingship had sealed the doom of the kingdom of Israel.

From the later history of the monarchy I want to pick out tragic illustrations of the way in which even the praiseworthy kings of Judah faltered in their spiritual leadership and, becoming involved in political intrigue, sealed the doom of the southern kingdom, too. This may be the key to the problem of how these outstanding leaders, notwithstanding all that they accomplished, failed to make a lasting contribution to the maintenance of the kingdom. There was a famous statesman once, who refused to let his biography be commenced in his lifetime, "for," he said, "I have seen too many fall out in the last lap." Uzziah, Hezekiah and Josiah, for all that they achieved, fell out in the last lap.

II Chronicles 26 tells of the achievements of Uzziah and summarizes the tragedy of his end in v. 16—"But when he was strong"—and the Hebrew word is used elsewhere to refer to political strength (cf. II Chronicles 12: 1)—"his heart was lifted up to his destruction." His attempt to burn incense in the Temple was the crowning arrogance of a man who had achieved political success and been ruined by it.

The disappointing conclusion of Hezekiah's reign presents us

with some perplexing questions. He had done so much for God and Judah; his life had been miraculously restored; Jerusalem had been incredibly delivered from the armies of Sennacherib. Why then did he receive the terrifying censure of Isaiah in Isaiah 39, simply for receiving the ambassadors of the king of Babylon, who had come to congratulate him on his recovery? The fact seems to be that Hezekiah, as he had been tempted to do more than once in his reign, particularly by the pro-Egyptian party among his advisers, was playing politics. Merodach-baladan, a Chaldean prince who had been installed as king of Babylon, was looking for support for a rebellion against his overlord, Assyria, and coveted Hezekiah's help. Hezekiah's friendly reception of the ambassadors and his willingness to display his resources were a tacit expression of his willingness to aid Merodach-baladan in an attempt to gain emancipation from Assyria. That was contrary to everything that Isaiah had taught and stood for throughout the years, and he pronounced God's judgment on Judah: "Behold the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord."

The tragic end of Josiah is the saddest story of all. After a wonderful reformation in Judah, Josiah, quite incomprehensibly, went out to fight with Necho king of Egypt at Megiddo, notwithstanding Necho's solemn warning, "What have I to do with thee, thou king of Judah? . . . Forbear thee from meddling with God, who is with me, that he destroy thee not" (II Chronicles 35: 21). The phrase, "What have I to do with thee?" is found frequently in the Bible: literally, both in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and in the Greek of the New Testament, it is, "What to me and to you?" In all the instances where it is used we find someone intruding into territory which is not his (or hers, in the case of Mary at Cana), and the phrase really means, "We have different territories, you and I: you keep to yours, and I will keep to mine: mind your own business!" But Josiah did not heed Necho's words, spoken, as the record tells us, "from the mouth of God," and went out to perish tragically and needlessly at Megiddo.

Why did Josiah do it? The answer lies in the historical situation. Assyria, the enemy whom God's people had feared for so long, was in decline. Nahum had seen it in prophecy and now that prophecy was on the point of being fulfilled: the Medes and the Chaldeans were gathering for the kill. And just at this point, as secular history tells us, Necho, king of Egypt, decided to intervene, on the side of Assyria—not out of any love for Assyria, but apparently because he preferred a weak Assyria to the north rather than all-conquering Babylon. The disappearance of Assyrian domination was what God's people had hoped for and prayed for: now that it seemed to be

imminent, Josiah was determined that nothing should stop it. Assyria must be destroyed, and if Egypt made a move to help Assyria, then Egypt must be resisted. (Incidentally, the same pathological fear of Assyria's possible survival lay behind Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh, but that is another story.)

Josiah made at least two fatal mistakes. For one thing, he mistook the enemy—not Assyria, but national sin and forgetfulness of God. At first Josiah saw clearly what the real threat to Judah was; hence his wonderful reforms, culminating in an unforgettable passover. But then he got side-tracked into thinking that the enemy most to be feared was Assyria. It is a mistake that can still be made: let us never forget that the real enemy is sin—in ourselves, in the church, as well as in the world. Josiah's second error lay in mistaking politics for religion. Again he had started off on the right lines, when he saw that the first thing needed in Judah was religious reformation and revival. But then he felt that he must enter the political arena: a great conflict between world powers was in progress, and he must have a hand in it. So the Devil got him side-tracked from what was God's real work for him. And that is happening still, not least in Ulster today. God would say to those who are called to preach the gospel, "Mind your own business!" and our business is not the tangled world of politics but the preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is true that if the gospel of Christ is applied, as it must be, it will have its influence on the world of politics, but let first things be first.

Uzziah, Hezekiah and Josiah, and all the kings of Israel and Judah were not without warning about the consequences of their seeing kingship as a political rather than a spiritual office. All the prophets could see the perils of worldly and political involvement, and out of a burning awareness of the Divine Lordship in history they called the nation back to an acknowledgment of that Lordship in every part of life. It is not surprising, in view of the reluctance of Israel's and Judah's kings to accept and trust the divine sovereignty in the events of history, that the prophets as a whole had a profound distrust of the monarchy as it existed in their day. Hosea, for example, brought God's uncompromising message: "Israel hath cast off the thing that is good: the enemy shall pursue him. They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not" (Hosea 8: 3, 4). And he saw clearly the folly of putting any trust in either Egypt or Assyria: "Ephraim also is like a silly dove without heart: they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria" (Hosea 7: 11).

It is in Isaiah that the prophetic protest against the distortion of Israel's vocation by political entanglements is seen most clearly. He warned Ahaz that the only hope of security in face of the aggres-

sion of Pekah and Rezin lay in a steadfast trust in God: "Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted . . . If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established" (Isaiah 7 4, 9). He denounced those who looked to Egypt for help: "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!" (Isaiah 31: 1). Deliverance would come not from any alliance or confederacy of nations but only from a true repentance and a steadfast faith: "In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30: 15).

Isaiah did more than condemn the political intrigues of the kings of his day. He looked forward unwaveringly to the coming of a king with the spiritual gifts that were the mark of divine appointment, who would reign in righteousness and bring peace to His people (Isaiah 11: 1, 2; 9: 2-7). That hope was, is and will be abundantly realized in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah for the most part failed to convince the rulers of Judah of their folly in looking to human resources and political alliances for help. But he gathered around him a little group of the faithful, the remnant who dissociated themselves in thought and aim from the majority in their land and resolved to wait for the Lord's working in their midst (Isaiah 8: 11-18). Of that remnant Robertson Smith has written, "The formation of this little community was a new thing in the history of religion . . . for it was the birth of the conception of the *Church*, the first step in the emancipation of spiritual religion from the forms of political life—a step not less significant that all its consequences were not seen till centuries had passed away."

It took the harsh discipline of the Exile to cleanse the people of God from their preoccupation with an earthly kingdom and their hopes of worldly power. But the spiritual character of the kingdom was rediscovered then, and attention came to be focussed more and more on the future, when the Lord would perform mighty acts of deliverance for His people, which would make Him their king in a new and fuller sense. Often the vision grew dim, but always there was God's Remnant, waiting, as Joseph of Arimathea still was centuries later, "for the kingdom of God."

It does not come within the scope of this study to show how the spiritual character of the kingdom has again and again been overlaid with worldly conceptions and has had to be rediscovered. Christ had to contradict the current misconception of the Messiah as, to quote Professor J. S. Stewart, "a super Judas Maccabaeus . . . driving his way with drawn sword to the throne of an earthly kingdom." And fifteen centuries later the same kind of misconception in

the shape of the spiritual and temporal dominion claimed by the Roman Church had to be shattered by the Reformation doctrine of the Lordship of Christ. But it is of vital importance that the findings of our study of kingship in the Old Testament should be applied to the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ today.

It is undeniable that there is an unparalleled need and an unparalleled opportunity for the proclamation of Christ's Lordship in our contemporary world. Here is the one effective challenge to the totalitarianisms of the world—the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ over every part of life. Here is the one answer to the moral chaos of a society which resembles that of the days of the Judges, when "there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Here is the one hope of victory in the cosmic battle which confronts us today, at all levels, "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world," against the demonic powers that are arrayed against the kingdom of Christ. The Lordship of Christ is the one answer.

If the ultimate conflict is, as I believe it is, in the invisible realm of "principalities and powers," it is clear that the Church's weapons for that conflict must be spiritual. The Church's answer today must be a new rediscovery of the spiritual Lordship of Christ: anything less with which to meet the challenge of the world must be utterly ineffective.

What part, then, has the Church today to play in this spiritual conflict? The Church's possible roles have perhaps never been more concisely stated than in the concluding words of a book by a German scholar, Gerhard Gloege, on *The Kingdom of God and the Church in the New Testament*, published in 1929: "The Church has neither to 'spread' the news of the divine sovereignty in the world—that would be too little—nor to 'build' the divine sovereignty—that would be too much and to make God Himself the creation of man. The Church's task rather is to carry the divine sovereignty into the world by the Word of reconciliation through Christ, to make effective the divine powers as powers of the New Age, now breaking in, and to make the world ready for the onset of the sovereignly working God."

For the Church to attempt to "build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land," or anywhere else, is to **make the Kingdom a human enterprise and to forget that it comes down from God out of heaven.** Equally, for the Church to rest content with a proclamation of the Divine Lordship is to leave a **great gulf between the Kingdom and the world.** But for the Church to **bring the Word of reconciliation—the gospel of Jesus Christ in all its fullness—to bear on every part of life is to fulfil her God-given task.**

In the last resort, it is God, and God alone, who can make His perfect kingdom come. One day, in a way beyond our understanding, God will come breaking in triumphantly. That is the eternal hope which lies behind the great vision with which the New Testament closes—"The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever."

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