

1. Introduction

In his book Kingship and the Psalms /1, J.H. Eaton has drawn upon the material in many of the individual psalms in order to construct the Israelite ideal of kingship, or to be more precise the ideal of kingship held by Israelite piety within the Jerusalem establishment. The data for such a picture are provided by many different psalms, of varied authorship, dating and history, but it seems reasonable to suppose that the ideals of kingship as voiced within the liturgy of the Jerusalem cult varied little with the passage of time, from the era of David himself down till the dynasty ended in the early sixth century B.C.

It has often been remarked that the historical picture of the monarchy, in Judah no less than the Northern Kingdom, differs very sharply from the ideals of the psalmists. The books of Kings, in particular, offer the reader an unattractive picture of most of the actual kings who took the throne of Israel or of Judah.

The books of Samuel present yet another picture of kingship in Israel. They belong with Kings, of course, in the series of historical books of the Old Testament which by general consent are nowadays referred to as the "Deuteronomistic History" /2, and as such are very different from the Psalter. Nevertheless, we find in the books of Samuel a rather different perspective on Israel's leaders than we get in Kings. There are two reasons for this fact. In the first place, the books of Samuel cover the era when Israel first adopted a monarchy, an era when David himself, later viewed as an ideal ruler, lived out his career. The books of Samuel also present the prophet Samuel as something of an ideal ruler in Israel (and as a quasi-king, we might add). By contrast the books of Kings record the slow but steady decline of the monarchy - a picture of moral and political weakness, with few bright spots to be seen. Secondly, the treatment of Israel's rulers offered in Samuel is more vivid and varied than we find in Kings,

which strongly suggests the use of different sources or at least a different literary prehistory. Recent scholarship emphasises the many "prophetic" aspects of Samuel; it has been argued that there was an earlier edition of Samuel which may appropriately be termed a "Prophetic History" /3, to distinguish it from the final "Deuteromonic" redaction.

It is at least certain that many passages in the books of Samuel show a clear prophetic interest, in various ways. For instance, prophetic figures play important roles in the narrative, and there is a concurrent interest shown in predictions and their fulfilment, in prophetic warnings, advice and guidance. If it is true, then, that the Psalter offers us a liturgical or priestly ideal of kingship, then Samuel offers us something of a prophetic ideal of leadership. Leadership is a slightly broader term than kingship, and allows us to consider a Samuel as well as a David. Between these two near-ideal rulers is sandwiched the career of Saul. His is primarily an example to be shunned, a contrast to ideal leadership; yet the portrait is a subtle one, for he was a king who started well, and even at the end had some admirable qualities, as David's elegy emphasised /4. Indeed, David's own career is by no means unblemished /5. The portraits are thus complex, but the biblical writer or writers on the whole leave us in little doubt about their evaluation of characters and deeds, even though they do not often moralize. The portrait of leadership to be drawn from the books of Samuel is filled out by the lesser but not unimportant or irrelevant figures of Eli, Amnon and Absalom, who also either led or aspired to lead the Israelite nation.

Due to the very different style and content of Samuel, as compared with the Psalter, we are given far more details about the leaders of Israel than is provided by relevant passages in the Psalms. One difficulty about this fact is that one must seek to distinguish the incidental (or accidental) from the substantial features. For instance, we may fairly assume that to be a skilled musician like David was so to speak a bonus, not a necessary nor even a specially desirable trait in a national leader /6. On the other hand, what are we to make of the information that Saul, David and Absalom

were in their youth outstandingly handsome men /7?
There is good reason to suppose that this was not at the time a sort of optional extra but an important aspect of leadership, "a physical symptom of special divine favor"

/8. If so, this requirement must have lapsed as the kingship became dynastic; there is no guarantee that good looks will continue permanently as a family trait. Even so, the ideal could well have persisted, though scarcely as a major requirement.

2. Relationship with God

Much the same can be said, with more confidence, regarding the charisma of the Spirit of Yahweh, with which Samuel, Saul (initially) and David were all endowed /9. This feature of the early kingship, a heritage from the period of the judges, again died out with the establishment and continuation of a dynasty in Judah. Very probably the charismatic tradition was more persistent in the Northern Kingdom, but there too it would seem that the tangible and visible effects of the Spirit of God were no longer in evidence /10. In neither kingdom, however, was the tradition forgotten altogether; it reappeared strongly in the messianic concept /11, and we may be sure that throughout the generations it remained an ideal that the king should be truly empowered by God's Spirit.

Without question, then, the books of Samuel imply that a first essential in the equipment of an ideal leader was the endowment of the Spirit. While in the Old Testament the action of the Spirit is generally depicted as having temporary rather than lasting effects (where judges and the early kings are concerned, the leader is empowered by Yahweh to deliver Israel from military foes), nevertheless God could be expected to renew the endowment of the Spirit whenever it might be necessary. Thus we read that "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward", i.e. from the day of his first anointing /12. The Spirit of the Lord was, then, a semi-permanent endowment of the ideal king.

The endowment of the Spirit was by its very nature a gift from Yahweh, not some characteristic or quality of the king himself. It is made clear in 1 Samuel, never-

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theless, that Yahweh did not impart his Spirit to the unworthy. The same passage in 1 Samuel 16 which records David's receipt of the Spirit is at pains to re-emphasise his inner qualities: "the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (verse 7). The chapter goes on to record that Samuel, now that he had twice been guilty of wilful disobedience to Yahweh, had the Spirit taken from him.

Thus the endowment of the Spirit is linked with the broader topic of the leader's relationship with God. In all situations and circumstances, not just military emergencies, the leader of Israel was expected to be in touch with Yahweh and obedient to his expressed will. Samuel was himself a prophet and so had direct access to God's will, while both Saul and David had access to prophets, and were plainly supposed to obey them as Yahweh's spokesmen. Nowhere is this clearer than in chapters 13 and 15 of 1 Samuel, the account of Saul's double disobedience to Samuel's instructions /13, which led to his double rejection by Yahweh. The kings had their counsellors - Joab, Hushai, Ahithopel and others - and at times quite properly rejected their advice, but there was to be no arguing with nor dissent from the prophetic word.

No doubt the king was expected too to preserve a right relationship with God in the careful maintenance of religious and cultic ceremonial. This lesson may be implicit in 2 Samuel 6, the account of the coming of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. But if so, one must observe that there is little emphasis on this aspect of the king's responsibilities towards God. 2 Samuel 6 by no means highlights this royal duty. Some commentators find this lesson in 1 Samuel 13 and 15, since on both occasions Saul broke sacral precepts; however, the emphasis in both chapters is upon the prophetic word, not upon the nature of the breach itself. In the intervening chapter, 1 Samuel 14, we find a narrative in which Saul is described as breaching a sacred oath (namely to execute Jonathan) under the pressure of public opinion, and it is obvious that the writer's sympathies lay with public opinion.

The correct emphasis is

made fully explicit in Samuel's famous declaration in 1 Samuel 15:22f, that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams". The king's duties in the religious and cultic sphere were then subsumed under his general duties of obedience to God's expressed will. It was the prophetic word which was paramount; in the hierarchy of Israel, the king stands below the prophet, in the eyes of the writer of the books of Samuel. In practice, of course, things must have been very different, as the Ahab stories in 1 Kings demonstrate plainly enough.

The consultation of the oracle through the ephod is the other route in Samuel to learning God's will. It is noteworthy that David is constantly depicted as consulting the ephod in his earlier years. The ephod plays little role in the stories of his later years, however, and conceivably David's fall from grace is to be interpreted as due to his failure to ascertain the will of Yahweh. If this possibility be dismissed as an argument from silence, we should nevertheless note that 1 Samuel 14:18 may give some support to the concept. Unfortunately there is a major textual problem in this verse, and we cannot be sure whether Saul called for "the ark" (so MT) or "the ephod" (so the Septuagint). The latter reading is however preferred by the majority of commentators; if it is the correct reading, then the passage tells how Saul changed his mind about consulting the oracle and as a result, out of touch with God's wishes and guidance, caused the Israelite victory over the Philistines to be considerably diminished.

In all respects, then, the king was supposed to be in touch with Yahweh, aware of his will and fully submissive to it. He must not put his faith in big battalions. Saul's breach of Samuel's instructions in 1 Samuel 13, due to his anxiety to fight the Philistines before his army ebbed away disastrously, was an act of faithlessness as well as disobedience. What the king needed to know and consider was the will of God, not the logistics of Israel's armies. In its own way, 2 Samuel 24 reinforces the same lesson.

3. Duties towards subjects

The books of Samuel portray the leader of Israel in a wide variety of human situations - with friend and foe,

ally and traitor, relative and in-law, soldiers, courtiers, etc. To one's supporters and friends the ideal was gratitude and loyalty. This comes to clearest expression in the aftermath of Absalom's rebellion, when David was prevented by Joab from allowing his personal bereavement to take precedence over his debt of gratitude to his army /14. David was usually prompt to demonstrate gratitude: he repaid Barzillai and his associates for provisioning him during Absalom's revolt and he repaid the cities of Judah which had given him succour during his fugitive period in the Judaeen wilderness /15. To critics and personal enemies, on the other hand, **moderation** and magnanimity were important: Saul took no action against those who had been reluctant to recognise him as king, and David granted Shimei a pardon, even though, as the sequel revealed, he never forgave Shimei inwardly /16. Saul's ruthless and vindictive measures against the priesthood and city of Nob provide us with a contrast, the sort of conduct which was inexcusable in any king /17.

With relatives and close friends the king was to be strong and determined, descending neither to favouritism nor to sectional interest. David's weakness and indulgence towards his wayward sons provides us with a negative example, while his efforts to reconcile both Judah and the northern tribes after the defeat of Absalom show the vital importance of fair-handed dealings for the unity of the nation. 2 Samuel 21 is of particular interest, since it appears to show an interest in what might be termed second-class citizens. The Gibeonites had no legal redress against Saul's maltreatment, but God is depicted as overruling in order to force David's hand into giving them their full rights.

Humanitarian ideals are also to be observed in the attitudes towards a king's predecessors which the books of Samuel in effect recommend. The apologetic motive behind a considerable number of the narratives about David has often been noted. Many of the stories in 1 Samuel 16-31 go out of their way to clear him of the slightest act of treason or conspiracy against Saul. In 2 Samuel his complete innocence as regards the deaths of Abner and Ishbosheth is stressed, and the fact that he gave orders for the execution of seven of Saul's

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progeny is explained away /18. It would seem from all this that David's supporters felt an urgent need to counteract Saulide polemic and propaganda. Yet such a political motivation cannot have been felt much beyond the death of David: Why did the later compiler or redactor of Samuel preserve so much of this sort of material? There is a further consideration; we are apt to forget that in the ancient world it was no uncommon thing for a new ruler to eliminate all potential rivals, and one might have supposed that outside Saul's own family and tribe few Israelites would have been perturbed if David had turned traitor to Saul, helped to overthrow him, and gone on to kill prominent members of his family.

The implication of the apologetic material in Samuel can only be that it would have been very wrong, according to Israelite ideals, for David to have taken seditious action against Saul or violent action against his kin. Abigail puts the ideal into words for us: "My Lord shall have no cause for grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause", she told David /19. She averred that God could be trusted to defend his chosen king against his personal enemies /20, and here again she is clearly expressing the standpoint of the author.

Magnanimity, then, is the desideratum, even though the ruler who shows it is taking some personal risk. The risk is plain to see in the story of Saul's grandson Mephibosheth, who was spared and indeed honoured by David, and later had the opportunity to turn against his benefactor /21. Whether he did so or not is perhaps unclear, but that question is not directly relevant. In any case God sided with David, who emerged unscathed from the revolt of Absalom, and so Mephibosheth's potential hostility or treachery came to nothing. Thus the account of the failure of Absalom's revolt confirms the truth of Abigail's words that God would preserve the king's life against malicious foes.

On the other hand, those who break serious laws are in a very different category; they merit not magnanimity but on the contrary, severe punishment. The self-confessed killers of Saul and of Ishbosheth are executed

without mercy /22. A Shimei can throw stones and curses at David, but an Amalekite cannot presume to help Saul commit suicide.

4. Personal qualities

What personal qualities characterized a good leader? In the historical circumstances of the era, it is not surprising that the ruler's abilities as a soldier and general seem to have been paramount. The elders who demanded a king wanted above all someone to lead them into battle, we are told /23. The Philistine threat was defeated by David, but as the years rolled by Israel and Judah found themselves confronted by ever stronger enemies - Arameans, Assyrians and Babylonians - and undoubtedly the ideal of high military skills remained constant. This is confirmed by the later prophetic description of the ideal Davidic king in Isaiah 9:6 (Hebrew 9:5), which includes the title 'el gibbor, "in battle God-like" /24.

It should be observed, however, that the ideal king is not a conqueror but a deliverer. It is true that the books of Samuel record how David came to acquire something of an empire, but most of his wars were initially defensive. 2 Samuel 10 shows that it was the Ammonites who provoked warfare with David; and we may deduce from his severity towards Moab (2 Samuel 8:2), following earlier friendly relations (cf. 1 Samuel 22:3f), that the Moabites must have broken a treaty or taken some very hostile action towards David. Typically, in any case, the leaders of Israel are portrayed in Samuel as rescuing Israel from the inroads of her enemies.

The succinct pen-portrait of the youthful David placed on the lips of one of Saul's courtiers adds another royal trait - "prudent in speech" (n^ebon dabar) /25. Such a phrase encapsulates two supreme desiderata in a good leader: intelligence and insight, coupled with the ability to speak effectively. The prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 7 well exemplifies these two qualities, as he reads his people's minds and rebukes them effectively. The king must be able to recognise the truth when he hears it and decide accordingly. At least three individuals are shown as deficient in this respect: Saul failed to

recognise the truth of Ahimelech's words, Hanun failed to observe the lunatic folly of his counsellors' advice, and Absalom failed to discern that Ahithophel's plan of campaign was clearly superior to Hushai's /26. David, however, several times overruled his advisers, such as those who wanted to kill Saul in the wilderness, or to strike down Shimei on the spot /27, and thereby showed his wisdom and far-sightedness.

Closely linked with this ideal is the ability to command, a sense of authority. Saul's authority is emphasised in 1 Samuel 11, when he first issued his peremptory summons to battle against Ammon, and subsequently overruled those who wanted to kill his earlier critics. It is apparently a sign of his ebbing authority when he finds himself overruled by his men in chapter 14. More than one leader of Israel failed to exercise authority within his own palace (so to speak). Eli was weak and ineffective in handling his sons; even Samuel failed to control his sons; and David's troubles with his sons are notorious /28. Saul, interestingly enough, seems to be the one exception; within his own family he was and remained powerfully dominant.

The king should be a man of his word, honourable, loyal and trustworthy even to his own hurt. These characteristics are well illustrated in David's generous treatment of Mephibosheth, who, as noted above, was potentially a source of danger to him. It may be noted in passing that a number of scholars have suggested that by bringing Mephibosheth to the royal court David was not so much honouring him as placing him under observation; there are however, no strong grounds for interpreting David's actions thus /29, and it is at least clear that the narrator saw and described David's conduct towards Mephibosheth wholly in positive terms. David not only showed magnanimity towards this grandson of Saul but more, he scrupulously maintained his loyalty to a man long since dead, namely Mephibosheth's father Jonathan /30. David's deceitfulness towards Ahimelech at Nob is acknowledged to be reprehensible; David himself later admitted his fault /31. Where Israel's foes are concerned, however, it seems that to the biblical writer deceit

was legitimate, or at least not reprehensible. The story of how David fooled the Philistine King Achish more than once is recounted with some relish, it would seem; but it is true that the narrator's purpose was probably to emphasise the grave plight in which David found himself, and desperate situations demand desperate remedies /32.

Above all, the king's reliability must be seen in the realm of law and its administration. The ideal of the just king was no doubt an ancient Near Eastern stereotype and it surfaces in several ways in the books of Samuel. Saul's trial and verdict in the case of Ahimelech and Nob are a travesty of justice, but David is the model of a just king - even when the criminal at the bar is, he discovers too late, himself /33. Absalom's ploy in attracting a following /34 suggests that there were delays in the machinery of justice rather than positive injustices under David's rule, but at least the point is made that the proper and thorough maintenance of justice and equity was a vital and indispensable royal role /35.

That a king should not be grasping or rapacious in any way is a point made in more ways than one. The prophet Samuel's description of the intrinsic nature of kingship in 1 Samuel 8, with its monotonous repetition of yiqqah, "he will take", speaks for itself. The urge to seize other men's belongings is all too typical of national leaders, as the familiar story of King Ahab and Naboth's vineyard demonstrates /36. D.M. Gunn has argued that two dominant motifs of David's career as king are precisely "giving" and "grasping" /37. As a rule rapacity did not characterize David - notably, he made no attempt whatever to gain Saul's crown - but he did seize Bathsheba and stole her husband's life from him. In punishment of David, Amnon seized Tamar and Absalom stole his life, going on to steal the kingdom from David. Early in 1 Samuel we note the same sort of wilful greed exhibited by Eli's sons /38.

4. The Function of the King

It remains to consider briefly three metaphors for kingship which the books of Samuel offer us. The first appears in 2 Samuel 21:17, where David is described by

his troops as "the lamp of Israel", a recognition of his centrality and his value to the nation. Today we should probably employ rather different metaphors to express the same idea, e.g. that he provided Israel with a "focus", or that the nation was "rudderless" without his leadership. Ideally the king was indeed "worth ten thousand" of his subjects, as his troops declared on another occasion /39.

In 2 Samuel 23:4 the value of just rule is depicted as like "morning light" and the morning sun, and also like "rain", beneficial and productive natural phenomena. In **other words**, justice is more than a negative benefit, a mere absence of wrongdoing; it is the very basis of a sound and united society, and in Israel it was the king who was solely responsible for ordering and maintaining it.

Finally, the familiar concept of the king as shepherd is expressed, though by use of the verb rather than the noun, in 2 Samuel 5:2: God had ordained that David should "be shepherd" of Israel. This was a metaphor for kingship common throughout the Near East, and may sometimes have **been** a mere cliché; but yet it conveniently summarizes the ideal of leadership for us. The king was a person whose whole raison d'être was the welfare of his people, whom he was to support, maintain and protect against all outside marauders while treating each of his flock as of equal value. In the Christian church we are thoroughly familiar with the concept of the minister as shepherd or pastor; it is interesting to consider that the ancient Near East saw the king's proper function in the same light.

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In the books of Samuel, then, we find quite a rounded and comprehensive picture of leadership, a picture which not only sought to describe the past but to establish a blueprint for the future. Undoubtedly there is a latent Messianic thrust in Samuel. For the Christian reader, Samuel leaves us the possibility of matching the blueprint with the words and deeds of "great David's greater Son", and also of assessing our own attempts at Christian leadership in the light of the ideals of ancient Israel.

Notes

1. J.H. Eaton, Kingship and the Psalms (SBT ii, 32), London 1976.
2. For a brief account of the Deuteronomic History in recent scholarship, see the entry by D.N. Freedman in IDB, Supplementary volume, Nashville 1976, pp 226ff.
3. See especially P.K. McCarter, I Samuel (Anchor Bible, 8), Garden City 1980, pp 18-23.
4. Cf. 2 Samuel 1:-9-27.
5. David's adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband are all too well known; but in general he is portrayed in realistic human terms, even if the picture tends towards idealisation.
6. Amos 6:5 might express some criticism of David in this regard.
7. 1 Samuel 9:2; 16:12; 2 Samuel 14:25f.
8. Cf. McCarter, op.cit, p173.
9. Samuel himself by implication (cf. 1 Samuel 3); 1 Samuel 10:10; 16:13.
10. A. Alt (VT 1(1951) pp 7-22; republished in English in Essays in Old Testament History and Religion, Oxford (1966), pp 239-259) emphasised the differences in this respect between the two kingdoms. However, by "charismatic" Alt was referring to the concept of the divine choice of each king or judge, expressed through a prophet, rather than to any evidence of the divine spirit's endowment.
11. Cf. Isaiah 11:1f.
12. 1 Samuel 16:13.

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13. D.M. Gunn argues in his monograph, The Fate of King Saul (Sheffield, 1980), pp 33-56, that the narrator of 1 Samuel 13 and 15 was less than sure that Saul was guilty of such disobedience. In spite of the difficulties these chapters pose for modern readers, however, it seems to me beyond question that the original writer or writers considered Saul guilty.
14. 2 Samuel 19:1-8.
15. 2 Samuel 19:31-40; 1 Samuel 30:26-31.
16. 1 Samuel 11:12f; 2 Samuel 19:-6-23; 1 Kings 2:8f.
17. 1 Samuel 22: 16-19.
18. 2 Samuel 3:28-39; 4:9-12; 21:1-6.
19. Cf. 1 Samuel 25:31. Although Abigail was speaking primarily about her own husband and household, it may be that her husband Nabal figures as a sort of symbol for Saul; cf. R.P. Gordon, Tyndale Bulletin 31 (1980), pp 37-64, who can even describe Saul as "Nabal's alter ego" (p43).
20. Cf. 1 Samuel 25:29.
21. Cf. 2 Samuel 9; 16:1-4.
22. 2 Samuel 1:13-16; 4:9-12.
23. 1 Samuel 8:19f.
24. This is the NEB rendering of the phrase, traditionally rendered "(the) mighty God".
25. Cf. 1 Samuel 16:18.
26. Cf. 1 Samuel 22:14ff; 2 Samuel 10:3ff; 17:1-14.
27. 1 Samuel 24:4-7; 26:8-11; 2 Samuel 16:5-13.

28. 1 Samuel 2:22-25; 8:1ff; 2 Samuel 13ff.
29. 2 Samuel 9 tells us that Mephibosheth's previous residence was in decent obscurity close to the borders of Israel; it seems likely that he was less of a hazard here in Lo-debar than in the capital, to which David transferred him.
30. Cf. 2 Samuel 9:1. It is unfortunate that some English translations obscure the theme of loyalty that is inherent in the Hebrew noun hesed in this verse; 2 Samuel 10:2 uses precisely the same phraseology for loyalty to an international treaty.
31. 1 Samuel 21f; see especially 22:22.
32. Cf. 1 Samuel 21:13f; 27:8-12; 28:1f; 29:8f.
33. 1 Samuel 22:11-19; 2 Samuel 12:1-7.
34. 2 Samuel 15:1-6.
35. On this general topic, see now K.W. Whitelam, The Just King (Sheffield, 1979).
36. 1 Kings 21.
37. Cf. O.M. Gunn, The Story of King David (Sheffield, 1978), pp 94-103.
38. 1 Samuel 2:12-17.
39. 2 Samuel 18:3.