

The People's Choice: How Can the Stories of the Kings of Israel Shed Light on the Politics of Today?

I Samuel 8

Elizabeth McGregor Simmons

Davidson College Presbyterian Church, Davidson, North Carolina

Shortly after it was announced that the preachers at our church would be conducting a summer worship series entitled “The People’s Choice,” based on topics suggested by congregants, the pastors received the following email:

I’ve always been intrigued by the story of Saul and his reign as king of the Israelites. First off, that God agreed to appoint a king mystifies me, and then that He chose a man who would fail to follow His commands via Samuel, causing God to seemingly admit making a mistake and turning to David as Saul’s successor. Perhaps there was no mistake, but simply an example of an individual not following through on a mission, promise, etc. Human failure as it were. Does God lead individuals to rule in today’s world? Is all of our political landscape unfolding just as it should? Is there a lesson woven into the writings in Samuel that we can apply to our world today?

This topic was scheduled for July 30, 2017, months earlier. At the time of the scheduling, no one had any way of knowing that it would be the sermon topic on the Sunday morning following a particularly tumultuous week, politically speaking. What we could predict is that we would be reflecting upon God’s appointing of the first king of Israel amid widespread disillusionment about political leadership.

In 2015, Ketchum Leadership Communication Monitor (KLCM) conducted a global study which polled 6,509 people in 13 countries across five continents for their views on effective leadership. Here is some of what they found: 90 percent of Americans believe the nation is facing a crisis of leadership. According to the Global Disillusionment Index, China is the least disillusioned with its leaders, Spain is the most disillusioned with its leaders, and the United States has an average amount of disillusionment. In the United States, seven percent of the population have confidence in Congress, 29 percent have confidence in the presidency, and 30 percent have confidence in the Supreme Court. In the interest of full disclosure, 25 percent of the population have confidence in religious leaders. (At least we beat Congress!)

Each of you will have to decide for yourself whether it is of great comfort or little comfort to know that things haven’t changed much in the more than 3,000 years that have elapsed since Saul was anointed as the first king of Israel.

The first question voiced in the email was this: Does God lead individuals to rule? Before attempting to answer the question, it seems right to take a quick glance at a bit of historical background to Saul’s being chosen as king and how the unfolding of events described in I Samuel 8 signaled a reversal of politics as usual in the ancient world. In the ancient world, kingship was viewed as being initiated from the gods above. Let’s take as an example the great king Hammurabi, who ruled over Babylonia

for an astonishing 42 years (1692-1650 BCE). There is a famous stele which you have probably seen. The deity Marduk is sitting on the throne; Hammurabi is standing, humbly receiving the scepter from the enthroned god. This image expresses the standard understanding of kingship in the ancient Near East. The gods created the institution of monarchy so that their will would be executed on earth through earthly rulers which they would appoint.

I Samuel 8 presents a radically different origin of political rule. Rather than “descending from above,” the biblical text describes the origin of Saul’s kingship as “rising from below.” Striking about this ancient story is how it is permeated by an overwhelming sense of sadness, not only on Samuel’s part, but on God’s part. Samuel was troubled because of the people’s request for a king. In a moment so tender that it almost breaks your heart, God comforts Samuel by emphasizing that it was the people’s decision. It is not *you* who have been rejected, but *me*, God says.

This is not a God whose power descends from above, but a God who grants people the gift of freedom—the freedom to make good decisions *and* the freedom to make bad decisions. God self-limits God’s own power and authority, one might say. Twice, God instructs Samuel “to listen to the voice of the people.”¹ So, to answer the first email question, No, God does not appoint people to rule. Rather, God grants human beings the free agency of making decisions and then bearing the consequences of those decisions.

Now let’s take a closer look at what the people were looking for in a leader. The people’s desire for a king is clearly driven by powerful fear and a hunger for security. The elders do not even discern that having a king “because everybody else is doing it” is in principle dangerous or alien to God.² But Samuel sees it and gives voice to God’s stern warning to the people. It is as prescient and true a description as there could ever be about what imperial power does. Unchecked, the powerful will take from the weak; the center will take from the margins. Imperial power has a voracious appetite for your land, for your children in times of warfare, for your livelihoods. Is this what you want?³ In your heart of hearts shaped by the gracious love of God, is this what you really want? And this, ultimately, I believe, is that question that I Samuel 8 poses for people of faith as we consider our role as citizens, as believing people who are not at leisure to withdraw from questions related to public life.

The choice that the people of Israel faced is ever before God’s believing people. *The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions* bears witness to this. More often than not, these confessions, creeds, and catechisms are documents which indicate costly choice by those who penned them, documents which indicate that when fear for the future and hunger for security are tugging at our hearts, God’s people will be guided by the principle that public power is not for taking advantage, but for sharing and giving.⁴

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this in the *Book of Confessions* is the “Theological Declaration of Barmen.” “The Barmen Declaration” was approved on May 30, 1934. In this document, a minority within the Evangelical Church of Germany reconstituted itself as a “Confessing Church.” The idolatry of the “German Christians” in giving an ultimate commitment to the state rather than God was declared to be error. Jesus Christ, as attested in scripture, was proclaimed as the one Word of God and Lord of all life.⁵

One of the events leading up to the “Barmen Declaration” was Adolf Hitler’s

decision to summon 40 prominent church leaders to meet with him. At one point, Hitler declared to Martin Niemöller, “You leave the care of the Third Reich to me, and you look after the church.” As the assembled clergy were leaving, Niemöller turned and addressed Hitler, “Herr Reichskanzler, you said just now, ‘I will take care of the German people.’ But we too as Christians and as churchmen have a responsibility toward the German people. That responsibility was entrusted to us by God, and neither you nor anyone in this world has the power to take it from us.”⁶

When we lay the choice of the people of Israel and the choice of the members of the Confessing Church of Germany alongside each other, we are offered a stark contrast and, I would say, an instructive contrast, as we, Christians, people of faith, the church of today, seek to be those who, as we deal with our own fears about the future and yearning for security, are granted the frightening gift of freedom by our God whose moral center lies not in taking advantage, but in giving and sharing.

In an essay about the intersection of faith and politics that was written by Don Shriver way back in the 1980’s, he wrote, “You will never know that truth or the error of any connection of faith and politics unless you subject yourself regularly to the combined disciplines of prayer, Bible study, church-going, conversation with friends [and I would add, people with whom you do not agree], and participation in collective political activities.”⁷ The combination of these disciplines in our lives heightens the odds that the choices we make at the intersection of Religion Avenue and Politics Boulevard will be faithful in not taking advantage, but in giving and sharing.

Together we will remember Paul’s words in Romans 13, that civil authority is to be “God’s servant for the people’s common good.” Together we will remember that legal and court systems are to be procedurally just and fair. The biblical prophets regularly rail against corrupt court decisions and systems, in which the wealthy and powerful manipulate the legal processes for their own benefit and put the poor into greater debt or distress. The prophet Amos was speaking directly to the courts when he said, “Hate evil, love good, maintain just in the courts.” Together we will remember that governmental authority is to protect the poor in particular. Jeremiah, speaking of King Josiah (Yes, there were some good kings!) said, “He defended the cause of the poor and the needy, and so all went well.” And we will remember and pray Psalm 72 for our political leaders: “Give the king your justice, O God.... May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.”⁸

Is there a lesson woven into the writings in Samuel that we can apply to our world today? Perhaps the answer is actually a question, a question addressed squarely at you and at me: At the intersection of Religion Avenue and Politics Boulevard, as people of faith and as citizens, will we lean into the choice which is grounded in God’s moral principle of not taking advantage, but of giving and sharing?

Notes

1 Roger Nam, “Commentary on I Samuel 8: 4-11 [12-15] 16-20 [11:14-15],” www.workingpreacher.org, June 7, 2015.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 65.

3 Eric D. Barreto, “Scandalous Leaders, Scandalous Power,” www.huffingtonpost.com, June 1, 2016.

4 Brueggemann, 69.

5 Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to The Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster

Press, 1985), 190.

6 *Ibid.*, 187.

7 Donald W. Shriver, "A Political Lifestyle and Agenda for Presbyterians in the Nineteen-Eighties," *Reformed Faith and Politics*, edited by Ronald H. Stone (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983), 186.

8 Jim Wallis, "Caring for the Poor is Government's Biblical Role," www.sojo.net, August 30, 2012.