

## The Kingdom of God in Samuel

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that the idea of the kingdom of God in the Hebrew Bible refers to theocracy – the political system in which authority is exercised by God’s representative on earth. The relevant texts, most importantly parts of the Book of Samuel, explore the advantages and disadvantages of theocratic rule and compare that form of government with other models. Bible’s treatment of this topic is subtle and nuanced, recognizing virtues in theocratic rule but concluding, overall, that it does not deliver sustainable and effective governance in the real world.

### I. Introduction

The Hebrew Bible’s history of the Israelite people, extending from Gen to 2 Kgs, contains within it an extended analysis of political obligation and governmental design – a political philosophy that rivals in sophistication the theories put forward by Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece.<sup>1</sup> The key to unlocking the Bible’s political theory is to understand that the narratives are employed for expository and analytic purposes. They set up and investigate basic questions about government that have occupied later thinkers: What is the justification for the compulsory power that political leaders exercise over their subjects? Can human beings achieve a good and decent life in the absence of government and law? What is the basis for authority exercised within families and kinship groups? What is leadership and how is it achieved? What is law and how are legal obligations created? What criteria validate claims to political authority? What is a nation and how is it created? What is sovereignty? What principles of justice govern the distribution of resources within a society? What are the advantages and disadvantages of monarchy compared with other forms of national government? What limits, if any, constrain a

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Miller, *Ways of a King: Legal and Political Ideas in the Bible* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2011).

monarch's power? These and other questions are framed for analysis and insightfully discussed through the medium of narratives of Israel's leaders and their relationship with Israel's God.

Narrative may not seem like a particularly useful approach to political theory, given that the task of interpretation is complicated by the need to supply a key that associates the actors and elements of setting with political ideas and problems. As I have argued in previous work, however, it turns out that narrative is an effective analytical tool – so effective that it is widely used today, and is even a dominant approach in ostensibly scientific fields such as economic theory. Using narrative, the analyst can frame issues for discussion by specifying elements of the setting – when, where, and how events take place – and also the cast of characters – the figures to whom action is attributed within the narrative. The plot – the events that transpire in the narrative – is then a form of experiment: the analyst explores how events play out and, based on these results, can make normative assessments about the strengths or weaknesses of different arrangements.

## II. The Garden of Eden

The Hebrew Bible's treatment of theocracy as a form of government begins at the beginning, in the Garden of Eden story. The elements of setting in this narrative provide a clue to the political question being evaluated. Unlike the rest of the world, the garden is civilized: carefully designed, well watered, and scrupulously maintained. It has borders that separate the wild from the tame. It is protected against incursion: Adam and Eve fear no threat from outside. It is governed by a rule of law clearly announced and vigorously enforced. It is home to human beings and animals living in harmony with one another. And it is a venue for productive activity: Adam and Eve tend the garden on God's behalf. Symbolically, the garden represents a defined territory of land over which governance can be exercised.

The cast of characters provides further information. God creates the garden and all its creatures. He treats the territory as his property, walking there in the afternoon to enjoy its cooling breeze (Gen 3:8). He cares for the inhabitants and seeks to enhance their welfare. He provides them with food, a reasonable degree of freedom, and an opportunity for satisfying work. He understands their needs even better than they do themselves: it is God, not Adam, who realizes that man needs a helpmate if he is to enjoy a satisfying life. From the standpoint of political theory, God is the benevolent monarch of this small domain.

Adam is a productive worker and leading figure within Eden. God trusts Adam and gives him important responsibilities. Eve is Adam's helpmate. She feeds her husband and influences him from behind the scenes. The garden is also home to animals who apparently have the ability to speak and reason. Symbolically, Adam, Eve and the animals are the population of this territory – citizens, sorted according to a hierarchy of status, who are subject to God's rule.

What about God's commands for the garden? God decrees that Adam and Eve may eat any fruit save the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This dietary rule is both general and comprehensive. Because everyone must eat, the rule pertains to everyone. Moreover, the scheme covers the entire field of what fruits may and may not be eaten. This rule is thus an excellent symbol for the laws that a ruler imposes on the subjects within his territory.

In combination, the elements of the Eden story present a simple model of political organization: a small society defined within a well-defined territory, containing citizens and a household as well as a government, organized according to law, and offering its inhabitants the benefits of civilization and the opportunity to engage in productive labor. The narrative setting thus presents a simplified model of a political entity—a mini-state that provides governance under law and prosperity for those who live within its borders.

Governance in the garden is theocratic: God is the monarch of this domain. There is, however, an important difference between the theocracy of the Garden of Eden and theocracies in the real world. In ordinary life, theocratic rule is enforced by someone who is – or who purports to be – God’s chosen representative. In the Garden of Eden, theocratic rule is carried out by *God himself* with no human intermediary. The direct nature of theocratic rule in the garden provides a clue to the Bible’s evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of theocratic rule. The message is that in an ideal world – in a utopia where God rules directly rather than through human agency – theocracy is the best form of government. Those who would challenge theocratic rule in this circumstance – like the serpent – deserve to be cursed and reviled because they foment treason against the sole and legitimate ruler of such an idealized realm.

The Bible does not, however, draw the conclusion that theocratic rule is best for actual human societies. Adam and Eve are expelled from God’s presence and can never return. God will no longer rule over them directly. Practical governance in the real world, if it is to exist at all, must be administered by flesh-and-blood human beings. The question posed is whether theocracy, an excellent form of government in a society directly ruled by God, is also the most desirable system in a society ruled by human beings?

### III. Moses

The Bible begins its investigation of the latter question in the Moses narratives. Moses is the greatest leader in the history of the Israelite people. Yet his claim to authority is not based on the authority of office. He is not one of the elders and is not from a leading family. He is not even distinctively Israelite since he is raised by Egyptians, lives abroad, and marries a foreign woman. His claim to leadership is based on his connection with God: he is called by divine

command; governs Israel as God's faithful and loyal agent; receives frequent revelations; channels God's words to the people; exercises delegated supernatural powers; visits God's own habitation; and enjoys a license to parlay with the deity. Moses, in short, is portrayed in the Bible as a theocratic leader – indeed, as a paragon of theocratic rule.

Yet even Moses, as worthy as he is, does not succeed in being God's perfect agent. Num 20 tells how God gives Moses a staff and tells Moses to command a rock to produce water. Moses does as God commands, but instead of speaking to the rock, he strikes it with his staff. When God learns of Moses' action, he becomes angry. Because Moses "did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites," God announces, "he will not be allowed to lead his followers into the Promised Land" (Num 20:12). God's response to what might seem like a slight transgression carries a message from the standpoint of political theory. If a representative as divinely favored as Moses is unable to carry out God's wishes in full, then how much less faithful will be any other human being who assumes the mantle of theocratic leader?

#### IV. The Golden Calf

The story of Moses' transgression is a step in the Bible's analysis of theocratic rule. But in those narratives the Bible demonstrates only that in the real world, unlike the ideal setting of the Garden of Eden, even the best of theocratic rulers can never perfectly represent God's will. More analysis remains to be done by way of investigating whether theocratic rule can nevertheless offer a desirable form of government for actual human societies. The Bible takes up this latter question in the story of the golden calf.

While Moses is away on Sinai, the people entreat Aaron to "make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has

happened to him” (Exod 32:1). Aaron asks people to hand over their gold earrings, forges an idol in the form of a calf, builds an altar, and organizes a “festival to the Lord” (Exod 32:5). The next morning the people join in burnt offerings and sacrifices, enjoy a communal feast, and revel before the idol (Exod 32:6). When Moses observes the festivities, he angrily destroys the idol (Exod 32:20) and, with the help of the Levites, kills three thousand idolaters (Exod 32:28).

The story of the golden calf sets up the question of what happens when a theocratic ruler is less worthy than Moses. The story depicts Aaron as stepping into a leadership role. The people have lost faith in Moses. The demand that Aaron provide new leadership – not as Moses’ agent but rather as his replacement. Aaron, it appears, is willing to oblige. He carries out classic leadership tasks: collecting resources for public purposes (the earrings), building public facilities (the calf), organizing collective action (the sacrifice and revel), and exercising control over a symbol of national identity (the calf).

Aaron’s leadership in Israel, brief though it is, is theocratic in nature. The people’s demand is couched in theocratic terms: they ask Aaron to “make us gods who will go before us.” Aaron’s acts of leadership are explicitly theocratic: he builds a religious symbol (the calf) and organizes a celebration of worship (the sacrifice and revel). Aaron’s actions as theocratic leader, moreover, are consistent with his general role in the biblical narratives: although he never again seeks to supplant Moses’ authority, he is associated with a priestly office throughout the Bible (e.g., Exod 29).

The Bible condemns Aaron’s abortive attempt at theocratic rule. When God discovers what Aaron and the Israelites are up to, he accuses the people of corruption and disloyalty (Exod 32:7-8). So great is the sin that God vows to destroy the Israelites and blot out their legacy (Exod 32:10); only deft and diplomatic intercession by Moses is able to turn aside God’s wrath (Exod

32:11-14). The Bible thus argues that even a leader as god-favored as Aaron – a figure who in other respects enjoys a status subordinate only to Moses – can fall into disaster when he sets himself up as a theocratic leader.

In addition to this global judgment, the golden calf narrative provides more specific information about the risks associated with this form of government. Three problems are highlighted. First, the narrative tells us that the selection of the theocratic ruler is fraught with danger. Consider the people's demand to Aaron. Even though their request has the gravest implications for their nation's future, they do not deliberate or debate the pros and cons. They capriciously abandon the leader who has led them out of Egypt with miraculous effect, guided them through the desert, and delivered them to the mountain of God. They are experiencing no crisis nor urgent need to change their fundamental system of authority. Their demand appears whimsical, poorly considered, and motivated by the excitement of the moment rather than a sober assessment of their situation.

Aaron also comes in for criticism for his role in the move to theocratic rule. He is obligated to Moses on numerous grounds. Moses is Aaron's brother, his comrade in arms, his leader, and his guide. More than anyone else, Aaron could be expected to retain confidence in Moses and to counsel the people to await his return. Yet when the people approach Aaron with the request that he supplant his brother and revolutionize Israel's governance, he hardly thinks twice. Even though he has not received any word from God endorsing his assuming the new position, Aaron listens to the people and takes the lead in organizing a fundamental challenge to Moses' rule. If a figure such as Aaron, admirable in so many respects, can fall for the lure of theocratic rule, others less worthy will find the temptation even less resistible. The Bible thus

suggests that potential leaders will find it all too easy to use the claim to theocratic rule as a path to power.

A second critique, also found in the golden calf episode, is that theocratic rule does not encourage sober and effective behavior by the public. The Israelites become so excited about the golden calf that they nearly lose their senses. They “indulge in revelry” around the idol (Exod 32:6), “running wild” and “out of control” (Exod 32:25). The noise of their celebrations is so chaotic that Joshua, a seasoned fighter, interprets it as evidence of warfare (Exod 32:17). God’s judgment on this behavior is harsh: the revelry weakens the Israelites and makes them reviled and traduced by other nations (Exod 32:25). The message is that the ecstatic quality sometimes associated with theocratic rule is poorly suited to developing a stable nation which can command respect from enemies and demand a place of honor among other nations.

The golden calf episode’s third and deepest critique of theocratic rule is that it all too often leads away from rather than towards fidelity to God. Of all the Israelites other than Moses, Aaron is most expected to resist idolatry. Yet Moses is away for only a short time before Aaron falls into these evil practices. The message is that the inherently personal nature of theocratic rule imposes few checks on the ruler’s authority. If the purported theocratic ruler falls into sinful practices, the people will follow. Beyond this, a theocratic ruler faces a perverse incentive to change religious practices when doing so will undermine potential rivals (consider how, from Aaron’s point of view, the golden calf would have undermined the people’s lingering loyalty to Moses).

## V. Gideon

The golden calf story carries forward the critique of theocratic rule in several respects: it demonstrates that the process for selecting a theocratic ruler is dangerous and unreliable; argues



that theocratic rule is poorly suited to motivating desirable public behavior; and claims that theocratic rule may result in apostasy rather than in enhanced fidelity to God. These arguments, however, are developed in the abstract context of the wilderness wanderings. While they suggest that theocracy is likely to be problematic for Israelites in the Promised Land, they do not demonstrate that proposition. The story of Gideon begins the analysis of theocracy in this more specific context.

After Gideon saves the Israelites from the Midianites, the people ask him to rule as a dynastic king (Jud 8:22). Gideon rebuffs them, saying “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you” (Judges 8:23). Gideon asks the people to give him gold earrings from their share of the plunder. The people contribute eight hundred shekels of gold and jewels, ornaments, and dyed fabric (Jud 8:26). Gideon makes an ephod – a priestly garment fabricated out of gold threads and dyed cloth (Exod 29:3)—and sets this object up in his home town of Ophrah. The experiment ends badly: “all Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family” (Jud 8:27).

Even worse happens after Gideon’s death. Israel continues to engage in unsanctioned worship, only now they turn to a Canaanite Baal as their god and abandon Israel’s God entirely (Jud 8:33-34). They also fail to respect the claims of Gideon’s family, in spite of all the services he has provided (Jud 8:35). Gideon’s death is followed by a bloody war of succession in which Abimelek, one of his sons and a follower of the Canaanite Baal, murders seventy of his brothers. Abimelek’s treachery earns him a leadership position, but he soon faces a revolt by the city of Shechem (Judges 9:22-49). He brutally suppresses the uprising but dies in ignominious fashion by a stone dropped on him by a woman of another city (Judges 9:51-55).

The story of Gideon and his sons carries forward the critique of theocratic government. Gideon's brusque rejection of the people's invitation to rule over them might be seen as commendable, given that he turns down what many ambitious people most desire – the chance to be the king – for the ostensibly pious reason that Israel should be ruled by God. It quickly becomes clear, however, that in declining the kingship Gideon is not rejecting the call to rule. He is, rather, rejecting the position of dynastic monarch in favor of a different leadership role. Gideon sets himself up as a theocratic ruler – not a king, but rather one who claims the right to rule as God's representative on earth.

The Bible's judgment of Gideon's theocratic rule is harsh. The narrative puts forward two principal critiques which echo those found in the golden calf narrative. First, the Bible argues that theocratic rule, even if instituted by one who enjoys God's favor, is all too easily twisted into idolatry and sinful practices. The germ of this critique is found in the narrative of Gideon's ephod, which like the golden calf is fabricated out of gold earrings contributed by the Israelites. The reference to the sin of the golden calf carries with it an implicit criticism of Gideon's conduct. The Bible thinly exempts Gideon from the charge of idolatry, but the reference to the golden calf episode implies that his creation of the ephod is unwise and dangerous. The suggestion is that even though Gideon may have set up the shrine in Ophrah out of pious motivations, the unchecked power that he and his family acquire due to his role as theocratic ruler leads them into dangerous practices. The situation deteriorates further once the theocratic ruler has left the scene, because his (or her) successor may lack a bona fide connection with the deity. This happens in Gideon's case: immediately upon his death, all pretense of fidelity to Israel's legitimate God is abandoned.

The second critique of theocracy found in the Gideon narrative concerns the issue of succession. Because the theocratic ruler claims to act as God's personal representative on earth, the norms of succession associated with other sorts of political authority – for example, patriarchal or monarchical power – are not available to manage the transition from one ruler to the next. In consequence, the issue of succession may be determined by violence and disorder rather than by operation of legally recognized procedures. Moreover, there is no assurance that the successor who does assume power will govern with the same wisdom as his predecessor. These dangers come to pass in the Gideon narrative when Abimelek massacres his brothers and subjects the land to a violent tyranny.

## VI. Samuel

The story of Gideon presents theocratic rule in Israel under inauspicious conditions. Gideon is not commissioned by God to take over leadership of Israel. Like Aaron before him, he responds to the petition of the people without obtaining evidence of divine commission. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the theocratic rule instituted by Gideon ends badly. The experiment set up by the Gideon narrative, while it illustrates things that can go wrong in theocratic rule, does not demonstrate that a similarly bad outcome will occur in all plausible conditions of Israel's life in the Promised Land.

The Bible undertakes the latter task in the narratives of Samuel. Although the Bible refers to him as "judging" Israel, Samuel's leadership contrasts with that of prior leaders of the Israelite confederacy. He has been devoted to the priesthood from early childhood and is inspired by nothing other than religious fervor. He is the recipient of genuine revelation. He speaks with God frequently and regularly consults him on matters of public importance. Samuel's call to leadership is different from that of other judges. In his case the people do not

cry out to God to rescue them from worldly oppression. Rather, they experience a spiritual revival: they “mourned and sought after the Lord” (1 Sam 7:2). Samuel acts only after receiving assurances that they are indeed returning to God with all their hearts (1 Sam 7:3). When the people gather in Mizpah to anoint Samuel as their leader, they do not arm themselves for battle. Instead they participate in a ritual of confession (1 Sam 7:6). Samuel’s defense of the people is religious rather than military in nature. He does not defeat the Philistines through valor in battle but rather by devoting a burnt offering to the Lord (1 Sam 7:9-10). Samuel, in short, is a true theocratic leader -- the first after the settlement of the Promised Land who enjoys a legitimate commission to act in this capacity.<sup>2</sup> In the figure of Samuel, therefore, the Bible can explore whether theocratic rule provides effective governance for Israel under the best of conditions.

The Bible’s assessment of theocracy under Samuel is subtle and complex. On the one hand, theocracy under Samuel seems to have delivered significant benefits. Israel displays loyalty to God during this period. The people put away offending images and rituals. Samuel also achieves a modicum of national security. The Philistines withdraw from captured towns; the Amorites also do not threaten Israel (1 Sam 7:13-14). In some ways it is a halcyon period.

On the other hand, the Bible does not view theocracy as a viable system of government over the long run, even under a ruler as worthy as Samuel. Although Samuel ousts the Philistines from Israelite territory, they do not disappear. When Saul comes on the scene, God tells Samuel that the new king will “rescue [Israel] from the Philistines” (1 Sam 9:16) – a remark that would not be needed if Samuel had eliminated the risk from that quarter. It turns out that a Philistine garrison is occupying Gibeah in Benjamin at the time of Saul’s anointment (1 Sam 10:5). Samuel, moreover, does not establish a viable governance apparatus for Israel. His only

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<sup>2</sup> His predecessor, Eli, is a transitional figure who cannot be considered a true theocratic leader.

administrative appointments are to commission his sons as judges – and they turn out to be disasters (1 Sam 8:1-3). He does nothing to create institutions capable of governing a substantial nation. Even after he has led Israel for a long time, he makes a living providing oracles for pocket change (1 Sam 9:8-13). In spite of the decision at Mizpah, Samuel never really consolidates national leadership. While Samuel's integrity is unimpeachable, moreover, the same cannot be said for those around him. His sons pervert the administration of justice and Samuel does nothing to control them. Nor is it clear that others less objectionable would be available if Samuel's sons were removed from office. Lacking genuine revelation, Samuel's successors are likely to resort to divination or pretense.

Theocratic rule in Israel is very brief, amounting to only part of Samuel's lifespan. Even then, it comes to be rejected by nearly everyone. The people convene another assembly and demand a king (1 Sam 8:4-5). Even after Samuel warns them about all the hardships kings will impose, they remain adamant (1 Sam 8:19-20). God is not a strong supporter of theocratic rule either. He does not institute this form of government and never indicates that it is the only appropriate system for Israel. He tells Samuel to accede to the people's demand for a king, even though he knows that Samuel detests the idea (1 Sam 8:7-9). God would not do this if he were fundamentally committed to theocracy as a form of government for Israel.

The Bible codes its adverse judgment of theocratic rule in Israel through the story of Samuel's sons. Samuel, like his predecessor Eli, has two bad sons who corrupt their offices (1 Samuel 8:1-3). By providing bad sons for Samuel, the Bible establishes that theocratic rule is at an end: one bad son could be an accident, but two show that the entire line is defective. Unlike the sons of Eli, Samuel's sons are not killed. The Bible has too much respect for Samuel for that. But their role in Israel's government ends just as effectively. In Samuel's farewell address to the

people, he says “and now, behold, *the king* walks before you; and I am old and grey, *and behold, my sons are with you*” (1 Samuel 12:2). This mention of Samuel’s sons is more than a touching sign of parental devotion; it establishes that Samuel’s line – and theocracy as a form of government – has come to an end. Samuel’s sons are no longer leaders in Israel; they are simply members of the public who, like everyone else, are subject to the authority of the king.

### Conclusion

Overall, we can understand the Bible’s assessment of theocracy as follows. In a perfect world, theocracy would be the best form of government. The kingship of God is, after all, the form of government in the utopia of the Garden of Eden. But an ideal world does not exist in ordinary experience. In the real world, where rule is exercised by flesh-and-blood human beings, theocratic government is subject to shortcomings. Its institutions do not deliver the benefits of government over the long term. It is subject to abuse because theocratic leadership is intrinsically autocratic. The person chosen as the theocratic ruler may not receive genuine revelations from God and may not rule according to God’s wishes. Theocratic rule all too easily degenerates into apostasy. And theocratic rule performs badly as a guarantor of national security. Overall it is not optimal as a model for governing a substantial nation.

Yet the author’s conclusion that theocracy is not feasible in the real world does not obviate the importance of the idea. Theocratic rule remains an inspirational benchmark against which other forms of government can be assessed. And although theocracy disappears from Israel during the time of the kings, the power of religious authorities does not. The fact that Samuel once ruled Israel gives religious officials and prophets of later times a claim to authority – one which is used rarely, and which may in practice be more theoretical than real, but also one

which remains an element of constitutional organization through the entire history of ancient Israel.