

MOSES AND SAMUEL

ISRAEL'S ERA OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

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Samuel enjoys a special relationship with Moses in the Bible and in history. Psalm 99:6 links Samuel with Moses and Aaron: . . . *among those who call on His name – when they called to the Lord, He answered them.* Jeremiah warns: *The Lord said to me, 'Even if Moses and Samuel were to intercede with Me, I would not be won over to that people'* (Jer. 15:1). In fact, the Book of Samuel draws significant parallels between Samuel and Moses. Indeed, Samuel's career seems to be the culmination of a political revolution begun by Moses.

When the rebellious Korah, Dathan and Abiram accuse Moses of misusing his authority, Moses responds: *'I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them'* (Num. 16:15). Several hundred years later, when the Israelites complain about Samuel's leadership, he challenges them to tell him: *'Whose ox have I taken, or whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded or whom have I robbed?'* (I Sam. 12:3).

Moses predicts that in the Promised Land the Jews will one day say: *'I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me'* (Deut. 17:14). When Samuel is old, the people demand of him: *'Appoint a king over us, to govern us like all other nations'* (I Sam. 8:5).

Though Moses has two sons, he designates Joshua of Ephraim, who is unrelated to him, as his successor. Though Samuel of Ephraim has two sons, he anoints Saul of Benjamin to establish the new monarchy.

The Book of Samuel is a carefully crafted literary masterpiece,¹ and the attentive reader is expected to notice these parallels and explore their significance. The rebellion against Moses and the challenge to Samuel mark the beginning and end of a unique period of Jewish history. Sandwiched between the similar phrases and incidents is the era of a revolutionary political system.

A recurrent theme in the Torah is that a special relationship with God makes Israel different from other nations. For example:

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'I the Lord am your God. You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow: I the Lord am your God' (Lev. 18:2-4).

The rebellions of Korah, Dathan and Abiram were a direct result of implementing this revolutionary polity. Moses had separated the nation from its neighboring peoples and their own tradition by taking hereditary religious-political power from the first-born and dividing it between a new priestly class and a supreme charismatic leader.²

The traditional importance of the first-born is reflected in numerous biblical passages. Jacob risks death and accepts exile in order to wrest this status from his older twin (Gen. 27:41-44). He then elevates Joseph, the first-born of his beloved Rachel, over Reuben, the older first-born of Leah (49:3-4, 22-26). Jacob's behavior is directly contradicted when the Torah commands that a father *may not treat as first-born the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the unloved one who is older* (Deut. 21:15-17). God has Moses tell Pharaoh: *'Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you, Let My son go, that he may worship me, yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son'* (Ex. 4:22-23).

As the narrative in the Torah makes clear, empowering the Levites meant humbling the first-born (Num. 3:40-51). Significantly, Dathan and Abiram are specifically identified as descendants of Reuben, Jacob's first-born (Gen. 16:1). It follows, therefore, that their anger evidently resulted from the diminution of their position, as in their complaint against Moses: *'Must you also set yourself up as a prince over us?'* (Num. 16:13). As they saw it, Moses had taken pre-eminence from their clan and given it to his own and then appointed himself ruler of the whole nation.

Using similar reasoning, Korah's complaint was aimed at Aaron. Korah is a Levite, being the son of Yizhar the son of Kohath the son of Levi (16:1). Korah's father was the younger brother of Amram, the father of Aaron and Moses (3:17-19). Korah was thus the cousin of the newly-appointed High Priest. Korah seems willing to grant that a son of Amram, either Aaron or Moses, is entitled to rule; but he challenges that family's right to the priesthood as well. According to his calculations, the second highest office – High Priest – should have gone to the first-born of Kohath's second son, namely Korah

himself.

Thus, in his response, Moses says: *'Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community . . . to perform the duties of the Lord's Tabernacle . . . do you seek the priesthood too? . . . For who is Aaron that you should rail against him?'* (16:8-11). This is why Moses challenges Korah to perform the priestly function of offering incense (16:16-18).

To vitiate the arguments of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Moses denies that giving leadership to the first-born is an ancient tradition. Rather, he says, it is only as old as the recent Exodus: *'For every first-born among the Israelites, man as well as beast, is Mine; I consecrated them to Myself at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt. Now I take the Levites instead of every first-born of the Israelites'* (Ex. 8:17-18).

Where there is no Divine mandate for hereditary elevation, Israel will have charismatic leadership. For example, when Moses feels that he *'cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me'* (Num. 11:14), God tells him to choose 70 elders and *'I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them'* (11:17). So too, when it is time to replace Moses himself, his two sons are never even considered. Instead: *Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands upon him* (Deut. 34:9). This infusion of the Divine – being filled with the spirit – is what distinguishes the leaders from Moses to Samuel.

The situation conveyed in the Book of Judges is of a loose confederation of clans drawn together in times of crisis by a "judge" who was Divinely ordained for that purpose:

Then the Lord was incensed at Israel, and He handed them over to foes who plundered them Then the Lord raised up chieftains who delivered them from those who plundered them . . . and would save them from their enemies during the chieftain's lifetime But when the chieftain died, they would again act basely . . . (Jud. 2:14-19).

In this way: *the Lord raised a champion for the Israelites to deliver them: Othniel the Kenizzite The spirit of the Lord descended upon him and he became Israel's chieftain against Aram* (3:9-10). *The Lord raised up a champion, Ehud of Benjamin, to deliver Israel from King Eglon of Moab* (3:15). *The spirit of the Lord enveloped Gideon* (6:34) and he fought against Midian and Amalek. *Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah* (11:29), the

outcast son of a prostitute (11:1-2), and he broke the grip of Ammon. *The spirit of the Lord moved Samson* (13:25), who was consecrated even before birth (13:2-14).

Each of these leaders is individually called, and the position is not passed on to his children. When Gideon was asked to become king, he refused, saying: *'I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord alone shall rule over you'* (8:23). After Gideon's death, when his son Abimelech does, in fact, try to become king, the attempt is marked by treachery and mass murder (Ch. 9).

That the author of Judges should present this sordid episode in great detail is not surprising. Monarchy was a foreign institution, the practice of *all the other nations*. It was the political system of Egypt, where the Israelites had lived, and of Canaan, where they were going. It was an oppressive system in which a pharaoh was born to rule and generations of Israelites were born to suffer as slaves. The Exodus, their miraculous escape from this cruel world, was the central event in Israel's special relationship with God. That is why even the permission to appoint a king is filled with warnings about keeping him in check:

If . . . you decide, 'I will set a king over me as do all the nations about me,' you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God Moreover, he shall not keep many horses And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray He shall have a copy of this Teaching . . . so that he may learn to revere the Lord Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows
(Deut. 17:14-20).

This, then, is the context in which the Israelites demand that Samuel appoint a king. The event is suffused with echoes of Moses. When the people say: *'Appoint a king to govern us'* (I Sam. 8:5), Samuel feels personally crushed. But the key words were what followed: *' . . . to govern us like all other nations.'* This is why God immediately tells Samuel: *'It is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king'* (8:7).

In effect, the centerpiece of the Mosaic revolution was being rejected. The idea that Israelites could be distinct from the nations around them was epitomized in their having no earthly king. As Gideon had said, God was to be their king. When needed, there would be special leaders filled with the spirit.

By demanding an earthly king – like all the other nations – the people were rejecting this special polity and opting instead for the system that had enslaved them. Thus, just as Moses had warned that a king must be kept in check, Samuel tells the people:

'This will be the practice of the king who will rule over you: He will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen . . . or they will have to plow his fields, reap his harvest, and make his weapons He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will seize your choice fields, vineyards, and olive groves' (8:11-14).

But the people refuse to listen to Samuel: *'No,' they said, 'We must have a king over us, that we may be like all the other nations'* (8:19-20).

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 20b) records a debate over whether the passage in Deuteronomy is a positive commandment [*mitzvat asei*] or a concession to the people's weakness. Nahmanides (Ramban), Kimchi (Radak), Ibn Ezra and other Bible commentators struggle to reconcile this commandment or grudging permission with Samuel's anger at the request for a king. They offer differing suggestions about the parameters of the commandment and the timing and wording of the request. But there is general agreement that the people sinned when they explained to Samuel that their motivation was *'that we may be like all other nations.'*

The echoes of Moses throughout this narrative call attention to how this episode closes the book, in an almost literal sense, on a special period in Israelite history. Non-hereditary charismatic leadership set Israel apart from the surrounding nations. This polity lasted from Moses to Samuel. Establishment of a monarchy made Israel like all the other nations. The literary parallels between Moses and Samuel create thematic bookends that define and enclose this special era.

NOTES

1. Shimon Bakon, "The Book of Samuel: A Literary Masterpiece," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXIX:1 (January-March 2001), pp. 32-39.
2. The term "charismatic leader" was popularized by the sociologist Max Weber, who may have coined it. See William Foxwell Albright, "The Biblical Period," in *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion*, 4th edition, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 22.