

24. Defining the Role of a King (1 Samuel 8–10, 13, 15–18)

When Israel began falling away from its allegiance to God by breaking his commandments, it lost his protection until its enemies, notably the Philistines, threatened its very existence. Israel's elders realized that at that point Israel could no longer keep God's commandments *as a nation* as was required under the terms of the Sinai Covenant. So the elders asked Samuel to anoint them a king who could unite the tribes and lead them in battle against their enemies as Joshua had done. Israel's judges, who had ruled the people for a time, had never fully been able to accomplish this. Indeed, the main concern of Israel's elders was to seek the people's protection.

Samuel's first response was the politically correct one, reminding Israel that Jehovah, its God, was its King—its emperor—and that Israel was his vassal. If Israel would keep his law, or the terms of the Sinai Covenant, God would protect it. The Lord was duty bound to come to Israel's aid in the event of a mortal threat. As in ancient Near Eastern emperor–vassal covenants, he would annihilate a “common enemy” so long as Israel proved loyal to him. By asking for a human king, Israel had rejected Jehovah as its emperor under the terms of the Sinai Covenant.

But the options facing Israel were limited. For it to again become completely faithful to God *as a nation* would at that point be virtually impossible. To attain such a degree of loyalty, special circumstances would again have to occur. It had taken Moses two generations of instruction in the Sinai wilderness to raise Israel to that level. By now, Israel had drifted too far from God and immediate action was required to forestall annihilation by enemies.

Israel could also no longer appeal to the Abrahamic Covenant—God's covenant with its ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—although that covenant was still in force. Israel had covenanted with God directly, so Israel itself was now responsible for obtaining his protection. An entirely new plan was needed, one that provided for God's restored protection but without abrogating the previous covenants he had made.

Israel's elders understood that under the circumstances Israel again needed a deliverer like Moses, not necessarily a prophet but one charismatic enough to unite and lead Israel as Moses and Joshua had done. So the Lord agreed to Israel's demands for a king and instructed Samuel to anoint Saul. In its travail, Israel again gave birth to a “son”—the king of Israel—who was to become its deliverer.

Saul, however, fell into disfavor, proving disloyal by going against God's word. So the Lord directed Samuel to anoint David as king in place of Saul, who died. Unlike Saul, David gained God's favor, proving loyal at all times (except later on in the matter of Uriah). The Lord empowered David to subjugate Israel's enemies until they were no longer a threat.

After David had proven faithful under all conditions, the Lord made an unconditional covenant with him as a token of his “love” for David. As in other unconditional covenants, he guaranteed David a promised land and an enduring offspring. This covenant was again similar to those made by emperors in the ancient Near East. One category of such covenants was called a “Covenant of Grant.” If a vassal king proved loyal to an emperor under all conditions, then the emperor made

with him a Covenant of Grant. Such a covenant was a free gift, underscoring the emperor's "love" for the vassal. According to the terms of this covenant, the emperor was known as the vassal's "father," not just as his "lord"; and the vassal was known as the emperor's "son," not just as his "servant."

These features of ancient Near Eastern Covenants of Grant applied to God's covenant with King David. David was known as God's "servant" and "son," and God was called David's "Lord" and "Father." God guaranteed David an unfailing line of ruling heirs to sit on David's throne as well as a land in which they could dwell.

In addition, as in emperor–vassal covenants, God promised to protect both king and people from a mortal threat so long as David remained loyal. And the opposite: the king could lose God's protection for himself and his people if he was disloyal. In an instance in which David sinned, for example, a plague killed thousands. As you can see, on the king of Israel hung Israel's welfare for better or worse. David and his ruling heirs, in effect, now functioned as Israel's proxies, mediating with God in obtaining Israel's protection. Thus, although the covenant the Lord made with King David was unconditional, the protection clause of that covenant remained conditional.

David, being a loyal king, became the means by which God delivered Israel from all its enemies. In fact, King David's reign commenced a Golden Age for Israel. David and his son Solomon themselves became emperors over the nations of the ancient Near East. On the one hand, they fulfilled the role of "servants" and "sons"—of vassal kings—to Jehovah, the God of Israel, who acted as their "Lord" and "Father," or emperor. On the other hand, they fulfilled the role of "lords" and "fathers" to the vassal kings of their empire, who acted as *their* "servants" and "sons."

For the people of Israel, God's covenant with King David—the Davidic Covenant—changed their circumstances. In order to obtain God's protection from a mortal threat, they no longer needed to remain loyal to the Lord *as a nation* by keeping the law of the Sinai Covenant. They merely needed to be loyal to their king by keeping his law. But this situation also meant that Israel's fortunes would fluctuate with the king's faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Lord. All now depended on whether the king kept God's law. Instead of being a step closer to attaining the status of its ancestors, Israel was now a step further away. Instead of Israel proving faithful to God under all conditions, it left that up to its king.

For the people of Israel, the Davidic Covenant thus constituted a lesser law, as now they merely needed to obey their king in order to obtain God's protection. For the king, on the other hand, the Davidic Covenant was a higher law. He was now answerable for his people's disloyalties to Israel's emperor in order to obtain his protection on their behalf. Both the Sinai and Davidic covenants nevertheless followed the pattern of ancient Near Eastern emperor–vassal covenants, in which Israel's God played the role of emperor and the people or their king the role of vassal.

(Much of this material is taken from *The End from the Beginning*, 49–52.)