

KINGSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*

“This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ... He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves.”

— 1 Samuel 8:11–17.

“Some [tyrannies] developed because kings transgressed traditional limitations, and aimed at a more despotic authority.”

— Aristotle, *Politics*, V.10, 1310^a39.

Samuel, in this passage from the Bible, warns the elders of the Israelites of the dangers of asking the Lord to appoint a King over them instead of Judges, who interpreted and ruled Israel in accordance with Mosaic Law. The Lord tells Samuel, a Judge, that the Israelites have “rejected me [the Lord] as their king” (1 Sm. 8:6), and relays to the Israelites through Samuel the warning in the passage above in the form of a warning and prophecy: if the Israelites did choose to, despite this warning, push Samuel to give them a king and not let the Lord appoint another Judge over them, then they would encounter intimately life under a tyrant. The Israelites demand a monarch for two reasons: the “Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against [the Israelites]” (1 Sm. 12:12), and because the Israelites want to “be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us ...” (1 Sm. 8:20).

When Samuel, using guidance from the Lord, picks Saul to be the King of the Israelites (1 Sm. 9), the prophecy above is fulfilled by the Lord, as He promised. When Saul is appointed King of the Israelites, Samuel explains to both Saul and the Israelites

“the regulations of the kingship” (1 Sm. 10:25), and in addition to Mosaic Law’s over 600 commandments, provide the basis of the nomocracy that is subject to God’s will and command, for the Israelites are exclusive members of the Kingdom of the Elect in the Old Testament and enjoy a special relationship with the Lord himself. Soon after Saul is confirmed as king, however, he begins to commit transgressions: in his campaign against the Philistines at Geba, he offered burnt offerings to the Lord in a manner considered by Samuel and the Lord to be in violation of the Mosaic commandment in Leviticus 1 (1 Sm. 13:13–14). In the aftermath of the Israelite campaign against the Amalekites, the Lord rejects Saul as King and there begins the slide down the slippery slope to tyranny (1 Sm. 15).

The standard I am going to use to evaluate the devolution of kingship into tyranny is Aristotle’s. Aristotle, in his *Politics*, includes a discussion of the best practical regimes, where he denotes monarchy to be the best ideal regime, and tyranny its perverted form (IV.3, 1289^a38). He notes that “kingship must either be merely a name, without any substance, or be based on the fact of a king’s great personal superiority,” while “tyranny ... is the worst” of all possible forms of government (IV.3, 1289^a38). Kingship developed because “it was rare to find a number of men of outstanding goodness” to assist in the creation and execution of laws and the governance of daily life (III.15, 1286^b8) in pursuit of the goal of all political association: the actualisation of the potential for good (I.1, 1252^a1). Kingship is particularly exalted because of its “aim[s] to produce goodness of character duly equipped with the necessary means for its existence”

(IV.2, 1298^a26) and is “based on merit” (V.10, 1310^b31). Tyranny is perverse because it is “government by a single person directed to the interest of that person” and not in pursuit of the common good (III.7, 1279^a25). The standard I use above is derived from Aristotle’s sole reason why a good king can devolve into a tyrant: “Some [tyrannies] developed because kings transgressed traditional limitations, and aimed at a more despotic authority” (V.10, 1310^a39). This is important because Aristotle considers no other causal relationship in which a king could become a tyrant.

From the example of Saul, it is apparent that there were rules and regulations that governed his conduct as an Israelite — the Mosaic Laws — and his conduct as king of the Israelites (1 Sm. 10:25). Saul was granted temporary possession of the “Spirit of God” before he is made king (1 Sm. 10:11), and Samuel notes that “there is no one like him among all the people” (1 Sm. 10:24). Clearly, then, when Saul is first made king, he occupies that position in the society of the Israelites that makes him the most virtuous and faithful — able to be with the Spirit of God himself! Early Saul, Aristotle might say, was the ideal king: he was a man of “outstanding goodness” (III.15, 1286^b8) that was the first among the members of his *polis* in terms of that which is good and virtuous, and consequently chosen “on the basis of his merit” by the Israelites (V.10, 1310^b31). What changed, then — and how and why did Saul become a tyrant?

There is a biblical answer that proves forthwith in our examination. In the aftermath of the Israelite campaign against the Amalekites, Saul refuses to follow the law laid down by the Word of God to govern the Israelites’ conduct during the war.

Aristotle’s ideal king, however, would not do such a thing for the law is sovereign in Aristotle’s ideal conception of the *polis* regardless of who or how it is ruled, and the ideal king, who is the best form of government, must always act in accordance with the law and “never according to his wishes [and] outside the law” (III.15, 1286^b27).

Saul’s refusal to lay waste to the best of the Amalekite cattle and sheep was in violation of the Lord’s Word (1 Sm. 15:3), which *is* the Law of the Israelites received through revelation. Samuel later confirms the reason for Saul’s rejection by God: “Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you as king” (1 Sm. 15:23).

Thus begins the ride down the slippery slope to tyranny. Whereas the Israelites before this enjoyed a marked degree of freedom and liberty, once Saul is rejected by the Lord — and by extension, devoid of virtue — he begins his journey toward the fulfilment of the prophecy in 1 Sm. 8:11–17. The Israelites did not formerly enslave each other, and yet, Saul, in fulfilment of the ultimate term of the prophecy (1 Sm. 8:17), would deprive his fellow Israelites of their freedom and make them his slaves. The tenth of grain, wine, and flocks — not to mention the appropriation of property — would go not toward the pursuit of the common good, as Aristotle would expect the ideal king to, but rather to enrich both himself and his cronies, much like a tyrant, which Aristotle defines “government by a single person directed to the interest of that person” and not in pursuit of the common good (III.7, 1279^a25).

Allegorically read, the story of Saul is a Biblical rejoinder to those peoples who aspire to have forms of government they are ill suited for, and a consideration of the

possibility that even ideal kingship can devolve into the form of government Aristotle would define as tyranny. As such, Aristotle and the Bible agree: when the King, Saul, “transgresses traditional limitations” (V.10, 1310^a39), including the law of the land, and starts ruling in an arbitrary manner that is clearly outside or in direct violation of the norm — in this case, the Word of the Lord — the most ideal form of government can turn into the most perverse and corrupt form. The allegorical claim in the Bible, thus presented above, is true when evaluated against Aristotle’s standard. It is not that all monarchs are corrupt: both the Bible and Aristotle agree on this. The Biblical examples of David and Solomon show that when granted with an ideal king, a *polis* can prosper beyond its wildest dreams and fulfil to the extent possible its potential for good.

Aristotle, as can be surmised, holds Kingship in the highest regard — it is, for him, the most ideal form of government — but recognises the potential for it to devolve into tyranny.