



The more things change, the more they stay the same

2 samuel 8.⁴⁻²⁰ & Matthew 16.¹³⁻²⁶

Introduction

There is no end to the genius of scripture. There is no end to the depth of scripture's insights into God, into humanity, and into society. There is not end to its ability to penetrate the individual heart, "piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow" until it discerns "the thoughts and intents of the heart."¹ With such insight into the human heart, scripture can warn, instruct, and guide us.

"More to be desired are they than gold,
yea, than much fine gold:
sweeter also than honey
and the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is thy servant warned:
and in keeping of them there is great reward."²

"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning."³

With the value and genius of scripture in mind, we will look at two scripture narratives—one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. While they may look, at first glance, unrelated, we hope to show that both address a common human problem: the inability

¹ Hebrews 4.¹²

² Psalm 19.¹⁰⁻¹¹

³ Romans 15.⁴

and/or unwillingness to think beyond the puny offerings of this world and imagine and accept something infinitely more precious. Specifically, we will examine the inability of ancient Israel and Jesus' disciples to look beyond the self-interested and oppressive governance of even the best of human beings to the self-sacrificing and liberating governance of God.

Israel's rebellious choice...

By the time we come to the end of the Old Testament Book of Judges and the beginning of 1 Samuel, things were not going well in Israel; had not been going well for some time. To the nation's citizenry, it felt like Israelite society was imploding. One "judge," or, better, "warlord" after another meteorically rose to ward off the attacks of enemies only to disappear just as quickly, leaving the nation vulnerable once more to the whims of its enemies. Religious leaders were corrupt and self-serving, often choosing to serve the highest bidder.⁴ Brutality among individual citizens was scandalously out of control.⁵ Individual brutality led to societal civil war. Civil war led to genocidal madness.⁶ The final straw seems to have come when Philistines invaded "the homeland," defeated the nation's volunteer army, and, capturing the throne (the ark of the covenant) of Israel's God, Yahweh, placed Yahweh's throne in their god, Dagon's, temple to represent his defeat and subservience to Dagon.

Though the throne was miraculously restored and the Philistine occupation thrown off, this must have seemed to Israel as just the latest permutation in the ongoing and repeating cycle of national humiliations and catastrophes. It was surely only a matter of time before the next humiliating catastrophe, worse than the previous, came crashing down on the nation. The nation's citizenry could take no more. Something must be done. Something drastic.

So it was that the citizenry of Israel issued its demand,

⁴ See, for example, Judges 18 and 1 Samuel 2.12-17, and 8.1-3.

⁵ See, for example, Judges 19.

⁶ See Judges 20-21

“It’s high time that you appoint us a king to govern us as every other nation.”⁷

“But the thing displeased Samuel,” we are informed, because he knew in himself what God would immediately confirm,

“They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken me, and served other gods, so do they also unto thee.”⁸

Israel’s desire to have a king like every other nation was idolatrous. It sought to replace the one and only true God with a false and pathetic god. Even so, God yielded to their wishes, just as he had yielded to Israel’s lust during its wilderness wanderings.

“They soon forgat his works;
they waited not for his counsel:
But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness,
and tempted God in the desert.
And he gave them their request;
but sent leanness into their soul.”⁹

God would attempt to make the best of a bad situation—make lemonade out of lemons as the saying goes. He would allow them to follow their sinful wishes for a king. But he warned the people that their decision to be governed as other nations were governed would not be without consequences.

This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run

⁷ 1 Samuel 8.⁵ (author’s translation).

⁸ See 1 Samuel 8.⁶⁻⁸

⁹ Psalm 106.¹³⁻¹⁵

before his chariots. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots. And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants.

And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day.”¹⁰

“Your king will take and take and take and take,” he warned.

But the citizenry didn’t listen. They sustained their demand for a king; to be ruled just like everyone else on the planet.

“Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, ‘Nay; but we will have a king over us; that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.’”¹¹

Yahweh gave it the good ole college try. He tried to find the best possible kings. But, it was all for naught. Humans make terrible kings. Humans make terrible governors. Humans make terrible leaders. Human governance makes for terrible governance.

“We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men [or is it all?], as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.”¹²

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 8.¹¹⁻¹⁸

¹¹ 1 Samuel 8.¹⁹⁻²⁰

¹² DC 121.³⁹. Unfortunately, we often read this as if it says that almost all men resort to compulsion, rule in a domineering and authoritarian manner. Now, this is a common form of wicked governance. But, I

So it was that even under their best rulers, Israel paid a heavy price for their decision to be governed just like everyone else. Old Testament prophets, priests, and poets looked forward to and foretold of the day when the people would finally come to their senses and accept the governance of God. In Israel, this divine governance would be administered by Messiah. If those Old Testament sages didn't know it, the inspired writers of the Book of Mormon did know and proclaim it: the longed-for Messiah would be "God Himself."¹³

is revealed to be satanic...

In the days of Jesus of Nazareth, anticipation of Messiah was at a fever pitch. Over the previous centuries one foreign occupier after another had entered the "holy land" and humiliated its inhabitants—Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks. Now, the iron fist of Rome ruled in Israel. As was the case with John, the Baptist, every rumor that brought news of something unusual brought with it renewed speculation and hope that deliverance might be nigh.

"The people were in expectation and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not..."¹⁴

Jesus' disciples were not exempt from the fever. They too had been waiting and watching. And after watching Jesus for many months, and then being asked what they thought of him, they concluded,

"Thou art the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the living God."

think, this is a wrong reading. "Unrighteous dominion" is not simply domineering governance. It is governance that is "unrighteous" in any one of a million ways—all millions of which ways humankind's rulers have managed to discover and practice, be they in whatever form of government, from democratic to authoritarian. Human governance is, essentially inevitably "unrighteous dominion."

¹³ See, for example Mosiah 13.³³⁻³⁴, 15.¹⁻⁴

¹⁴ Luke 3.¹⁵

Pleased with their insight, but sensing, apparently, a warped perspective on what kind of Messiah, or King, he was, Jesus delivered the first of what would turn out to be a series of unpleasant warnings.

“From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.”¹⁵

The final bit about being “raised again the third day,” which we appreciate and understand so much with our advantage of hindsight, did not serve to inform or comfort the shocked disciples. They got stuck on the first bit; how “he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed.” And this did not line up with their expectations, hopes, or desires. It didn’t match up with what they expected from their Messiah/King.

“Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Be it far from thee Lord: this shall not be unto thee.’”

Peter, like everyone around him and like his Israelite forebearers, was looking for “a king to govern... as every other nation.” But Israel was no ordinary nation, this planet was no ordinary planet, and Jesus was no ordinary king. The ordinary governance of the kings of this world had shown itself to be catastrophic. The desire for more of the ordinary, just better executed, was more than unwise. In the time of Samuel, God had called it idolatrous. Now, God called it something similar: Satanic.

“Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Matthew 16.²¹

¹⁶ Matthew 16.²³

But news of Jesus' style of governance would get worse. His new style of governance would require a new style of citizen.

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross, and follow me.
For whosoever will save his life shall lose it:
and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.
For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?
Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Satanic is Peter's unholy desire for a king who is better at doing what all the other kings of this planet do. Likewise, Satanic are citizens who attempt to do better at what the citizens of all the world's kingdoms do.

And intractable

American society looks very much like that of Israel at the end of the period of the judges. It feels to many that it is imploding. One president after another rises to power, promising the world only to leave us with the world worse off than it was before. Too often political and religious leaders are corrupt and self-serving, often choosing to serve the highest bidders. Too often, they seek only to enriching themselves, even at the expense of the sheep whom they are called to shepherd in truth and righteousness. Brutality among individual citizens is scandalously out of control, as can be exemplified in the uniquely American phenomenon of mass shootings that kill hundreds of innocent Americans a year, the nearly 50 people a month who are killed or wounded in road-rage shootings, or the insanity of permitting, celebrating, and rewarding vigilante justice such as that of Kyle Rittenhouse. Citizens glory in the new cold civil war that hardens hearts and turns brother against brother, sister against sister. Citizens armed to the teeth thirst for the blood of a new hot civil war. How long can it be before America renews the mad genocidal impulse it acted upon against the original inhabitants of America, seeking to exterminate a new hated population: gays, Muslims, libs,

historians, scientists, etc. And who can say what role the shock and humiliation of 911 has played in the psychic break down evident in American society—or the 20 years of endless wars that followed, or the realization that after so many American lives lost and so many of trillions of dollars wasted, America and the world at large is as unsafe and violent as ever?

In the midst of such turmoil, Americans, like the Israelites before them, have gone on the hunt for a Messiah. Unfortunately, millions of them found their Messiah in a man as flawed as man can be; the one whom I call Caligula, the 45th president of the Disunited States. With his legitimate and praiseworthy defeat millions pine and agitate for his return, one way or another. Confederate elected officials continue to spew his lies and support his insurrection, attempted coup, and the dismantling of perhaps the greatest democratic experiment in human history—flawed as it has been.

Now, this evil, this idolatry as Samuel described it, this satanic intrusion as Jesus views it was and is bad enough. But the magnitude of the evil, the idolatry, and the satanic intrusion is made worse when those who ought to have known better, the very people who had the Biblical witness at hand, American “Christians,” are at the front, leading the charge of the evil, the idolatry, and the satanic intrusion. They ought to have known and know now that electing a leader who is better at doing the same evil as all the other rulers of the nations have done was and is not the solution to our problems.

But this, I suppose, should come as no surprise to any us. One of the very first things heard in this dispensation was the voice of God declaring that American “Christianity,” like all “Christianity of its day was an “abomination in his sight” and all those who profess it “corrupt.”¹⁷ Sadly, then, the words that God spoke to Samuel are just as appropriate today as they were millennia ago when they were first spoken,

“According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up... even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken me, and served other gods, so do they

¹⁷ JSH 1.

also unto thee.”¹⁸

Conclusion and benediction

God did not go to all the trouble of preserving scripture out of antiquarian interests. Rather, the preservation of scripture served a far greater purpose. “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning.”¹⁹ We learn many things from scripture. As we consider the choices ancient Israel and Jesus’ disciples’ made and were prepared to make in relation to their expectations and choices of kings, leaders, governance, we are reminded of the apostle Paul’s insight that “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” Indeed, “these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted.”²⁰

But, notwithstanding the examples and the warnings of scripture, Americans have lusted. “Christian” Americans have lusted. They have lusted for the same perverted and twisted governance that has brought the destruction of every other kingdom of this world. Millions of them lusted after the very worst that human governance has to offer. They lust for it still. In doing so, they have abandoned God and rebelled against his rule. It is enough to make this grown man cry. While I do not presume to speak for God, I think it likely that it is enough to make God weep today as he has wept in the past.

“The God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: ‘How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?’

“... The Lord said unto Enoch: ‘Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in

¹⁸ See 1 Samuel 8.⁶⁻⁸

¹⁹ Romans 15.⁴

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 10.^{11 and 6}

the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency; and unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood...”²¹

One hopes that our future does not include the same self-destruction that every proceeding nation has brought upon itself. But such hopes are uncertain and fleeting at best. At their worse, they are, perhaps, vain.

*“Why do the heathen rage,
and the people imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD,
and against his anointed, saying,
‘Let us break their bands asunder,
and cast away their cords from us.’”²²*

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

²¹ Moses 7.^{28, 32-33}

²² Psalm 2.¹⁻³