

The State in the Bible: a study in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, Judges 9:10-17 & Romans 13:1-7

Introduction: Jotham's fable (Judges 9:10-17)

Fables were the first pieces of Wit that made their appearance in the World, and have been still highly valued, not only in times of the greatest Simplicity, but among the most polite Ages of Mankind. Jotham's Fable of the Trees is the oldest that is extant, and as beautiful as any which have been made since that time.

- Joseph Addison, the Spectator, 29 September 1711

In Jotham's fable (Judges 9:10-17) the trees decide to choose a king to rule over them. They invite the olive, the fig and then the vine to take the role. Each refuses, on the grounds that it is more valuable for them to produce the crop that gives such pleasure to humanity. Finally they ask the bramble, who accepts but issues the warning:

*If in truth you anoint me as king over you
Then come and take shelter in my shade;
But if not, let fire come out of the bramble
And devour the cedars of Lebanon!*

The context for the fable is that Jotham's father, Gideon (also known as Jerubbaal), is invited to become the first king of Israel (Judges 8.22). He refuses, but instead sets up a government in the form of a theocracy ('God shall rule over you'). After Gideon's death, one of his many sons organises a coup d'état with the support of his mother's clan. The other sons are brought together for a mass execution. Jotham hides, survives and speaks his fable before disappearing. The triumphant son, Abimelech ('son of the king'), then rules for three years before his clan gets greedy and starts a campaign of violent robbery. Abimelech tries to reassert order but is killed in the fighting. The monarchy collapses.

The usual interpretation of the fable is that the trees who refuse the crown represent Gideon, and Abimelech is the bramble, a worthless tree. But this, as I shall show, does not really fit the text. In trying to make sense of this, I will agree with Addison. The lessons of this great political fable apply now, as much as in times of greater 'simplicity.' Ignoring these lessons carries risks even in 'the most polite Ages.'

First we need to consider the terms of the original authorisation given to Israel to appoint a king, recorded in Deuteronomy. We will then return to the story of Gideon and his sons, and the fable

that prophecies the outcome of their experiment in kingship. Finally we consider perhaps the best known biblical teaching on the state, written to Christians in Rome in the first century AD.

Deuteronomy 17: 14-20

In the fifth book of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, we learn of the legacy Moses left to the Hebrew tribes. He has led them out of slavery in Egypt, through the desert and to the edge of the promised lands lying across the river Jordan.

At a recorded time and date, forty years into their migration, Moses 'spoke to the children of Israel according to all that the Lord had given him as commandments to them' (1.2). In chapter 17, Israel learns that the time will come to choose a king, 'like all the nations' around them. But, surprisingly, this king will rule without great military power, personal wealth and multiple wives. Here are the usual ways by which kings exercise control - armies to suppress, money to bribe and marriages to make dependent families in the various parts of their kingdom. How, we may ask, can a king rule without these resources? There are two answers to this question – one of principle, another of practice. In principle, and in the answer on the face of the text, the king rules with the authority of God – he is God's choice. But this cannot conclude the examination. After all, most political power is justified by the 'mandate of heaven' whereby, in the words of the anthropologist Georges Balandier, 'statesmen are kinsmen of the gods.' How are people to know who has this mandate? The text says that the king will be a submissive student of God's law, a law he can both read and write, so 'his heart is not lifted above his brethren.' This king accepts the same rules as the rest of society, and does not lift himself above them. This will be one measure of God's endorsement, but it is useful only if the rest of society knows these rules and is able to judge the king's service against this measure. In terms of practical politics, without the resources of overwhelming force, bribery and polygamy, the king can rule only with the *consent* of the population. This consent is based on their assessment that the king has God's mandate to rule, which can be tested by his submission to the written law of God: so this is *informed* consent.

But why, anyway, would they need a king? Israel's sophisticated existing system of social authority is described in Deuteronomy 1.13-16. Tribal chiefs head structures with leadership over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, supported by tribal officers. Judges are appointed to settle disputes. This highly effective, disciplined structure served Israel well in migrating across the desert, and will continue to do so in conquering the Promised Land.

The text gives two clues about what a king would add. First, the people would decide to appoint a king when they 'possess and dwell in' the territory God has given them. A human king is a ruler of *somewhere* – kingship is permanent rule over *territory*. Second, having a king will mean they have a ruler 'like all the nations around.' Clearly this king will not be 'like' other kings in many significant ways, if he rules in submission to God's law, without recourse to force, money or multiple marriages. But Israel will give itself a system of territorial rule that mirrors that of its neighbours. With kingship comes a system of rule – the system we now call the '**state**.' A state is a particular kind of social institution. It claims control over defined territory. It does not exist alone, but exists in relation to other states – it is part of a system of states with reciprocal arrangements between states. A state claims allegiance of all who dwell within its claimed territory, and the right to use force to compel submission. When it gave itself a king, Israel would be forming a state - something it did not have (or need) before.

The coming of a state is not the same thing as the coming of 'government' or 'governance.' Families, tribes and other ways for societies to organise themselves all have 'governance' – authoritative systems for making decisions, with rules and procedures for carrying these out and enforcing them. A state is a social institution with an exclusive claim over territory. It has a government which oversees the conduct of the business of the state. It should not and need not abolish the forms of governance which social groups within that territory operate for themselves, including the conduct of family life. In our time this extends to the conduct of unions, economic units, associations, churches and so on. The state does not abolish judges, whose independence is protected under the doctrine of the 'rule of law.' If the state does abolish, or incorporate, these various forms of social provision, then its project becomes 'totalitarian' – its idea being that the state must represent the 'totality' of society. The bible endorses the state as a legitimate social innovation. It does not endorse totalitarianism.

With these points in mind we come to Jotham's fable.

Judges 8 and 9

In Judges 8.22, Israel asks Gideon to become king – he will rule over them, and so will his children. A king is head of state and also head of a royal family which supplies the qualified personnel for state headship. By this point, Gideon has used military power to conquer a defined territory over which he exercises control. In the border towns of Succoth and Penuel, he demands support for his troops, and when this is denied, he returns to destroy the opposition and demolish the tower that

dominates a strategic route into his territory (8.5-9). Elsewhere he uses charm and praise to assuage the wounded pride of those whose military support he has decided he does not need (8.2). By a mix of force and politics, he has built the basis for a state to exist – he has the ability to command the loyalty of the tribes who occupy the land, to project force across the territory and control its borders, and to enforce submission when necessary. By asking him to become king, Israel is asking him to consolidate the state that he has started to build.

When a delegation arrives to offer him the throne, Gideon refuses on the grounds that God should rule. But he successfully requests gold to make an ephod to be kept in his home city. An ephod is a garment, usually elaborately designed, used by priests, and others in suitable authority, when coming before God. In other references to ephods in the Old Testament there is no indication of disapproval of such dress. But in Judges 8.27 we learn that Israel ‘played the harlot’ with it and it ‘became a snare’ to Gideon and his family. The implication is that it became an idol. It may be that it was treated as an oracle, for Gideon to exercise rule while being, apparently, a channel for the direct rule of God. However this worked, clearly Gideon claimed to be setting up a theocracy, when what he actually brought about was idolatry. During his life there was peace – the new state was successful. But then it all broke down. It was assumed that Gideon’s sons would take over, but Gideon left no arrangements for an orderly succession. By not appointing a prince to take his place on death, he failed to secure the continuity of the state. His son by a concubine, Abimelech (‘son of a king’), goes to his maternal uncles in Shechem and draws them into a plot to make him king. He presents them with two arguments to use in the local community (9.2). One is political – if no action is taken, then all 70 sons of Gideon will rule. The other is self-interest – if one person is to rule, why not make that person one of their own flesh and blood? Temple money is allocated to pay mercenaries. The other princes, barring one, are rounded up and murdered in one mass execution. Abimelech rules. The sole survivor, Jotham, leaves his fable.

The trees ask the olive, the fig and vine to become king. They refuse, because they serve the community better with their fruit. The bramble agrees, warning that he will offer shelter provided they act in truth – but otherwise, he will catch fire and burn them all up, along with the finest products of civilisation (‘the cedars of Lebanon.’) In applying this, Jotham asks if the new dominant party has acted in truth towards Gideon and his house, warning that if they have not, they will be burnt up. Clearly Gideon’s supposed refusal of the throne is questionable: in fact, he continued to rule, albeit via the harlotry of the ephod, and his sons are expected to succeed him. There is continuity between Gideon and Abimelech – if the son is a bramble, so is the father. Jotham is not

talking about a choice between father and son, between good and bad tree, but about whether the people are looking after their bramble 'in truth'.

Commentaries mostly suggest that the bramble is useless while the productive trees are useful. But actually the bramble, the thornbush, is not a useless tree. It is grown to provide a boundary hedge surrounding land which can then be protected. The line of bramble, projecting painful force, will keep out intruding beasts and thieves. It will keep domestic animals within its enclosure. The boundary hedge of thorn does not replace the productive trees: it protects them. But in hot, dry conditions the thornbush can catch fire from the sun's warming. Its burning can destroy all it encloses. People who grow thornbush lines must keep them trimmed and watered – they must look after their bramble. Otherwise it may destroy not just itself but also the good things it encloses.

The thornbush represents the state. It is a tree specialising in the task of compulsion and protection. It should be maintained 'in truth' – with a correct understanding of its function and handling. Otherwise it will destroy all it is supposed to protect. People can live without the thorn, but it is useful to protect the other trees, enabling them to flourish and focus on their tasks. Jotham notes that the Shechemites have carried out a massacre of the princes, and this does them no credit. But this is not the main reason for doubting Abimelech's prospects for success (9.16-19). The real problem is whether the Shechemite clan has really understood what they have done in making him king – have they understood what the state actually is? As it turns out, they have not. They see it as a way to enrich themselves by creating means to rob the rest of society. Abimelech sees that things cannot be this way, and attempts to bring his gangs under control. He is killed in the process. Israel becomes a 'failed state.' Who is responsible? The blame does not lie solely with Shechem. Gideon had the honour and glory of rule, behind his ephod, but did not want the responsibility of building a sustainable state. Theocracy was his excuse for not respecting the 'truth' of the state. Abimelech uses political arguments that are not without merit, but takes a short cut to power by arming thugs using misappropriated funds. His uncles, facilitating this, are led by a desire to see one of their own in power, rather than by the continuation of the state.

In our own day we pay the price of failing to cultivate thorns 'in truth'. In Iraq and Libya, destroying bramble has not, as external powers supposed, resulted in the flourishing of fruit trees, but rather in fire that engulfed those enclosed and continues to singe cities around the world. Some societies benefit from thorns so neatly manicured and well watered that their combustibility gets forgotten, so it is important to make their keepers aware of the dangers of a return to the wild. Those who live

in the 'polite ages' may so fail to see their thorny nature that they confuse brambles with fruit trees and treat them as a source of wine, oil and figs. These good things become possible not *despite* the thorn, but *with the aid* of its carefully cultivated protection.

Romans 13.1-7

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.

- Paul's letter to the Romans, 13:1-3

More than a thousand years after Jotham's message to Israel, Paul writes to Christians in Rome, where the local church sits in the capital of a great international state system. In this system, the benefits of civilisation are accompanied by phenomenal state violence, and the new Jesus movement was acutely aware of the injustice with which that violence was applied. The church worships Jesus Christ, whose earthly life ended in public execution on a state charge of political rebellion after authorities were forced to rule on an accusation of blasphemy made by the Jewish religious authorities. Christ's own brother, James, died a wave of political persecution, described in the book of Acts in chapter 12. Christian leaders disobeyed rulers' instructions not to preach about the life, death and resurrection of their Lord – they would obey God rather than man (Acts 5.29).

So how could Paul possibly say that only wrongdoers could suffer at the hands of the state, and that doing the right thing would bring approval from the pagan, violent regime in charge of the government of Rome? What could he mean?

The apparent difficulties in Romans 13 have attracted many would-be solutions. One view has the passage actually saying that, as the state's authority is delegated by God (13.1), it must be faithful to the law of God. Disobedience to the state is then justified – even necessary – if it does not work in accordance with God's law. This logic takes us to a situation where Christians struggle for political power in order to impose (their version of) God's law. As the state upholds (one version of) Christianity, this leads the state to define in law a preferred account of Christianity. This inevitably turns out to violate the freedom of Christians who take a different view.

Another view reads the passage as forbidding Christian entry into the service of the state. The state has the task of avenging evil (13.4) but Christians are not to be vengeful (12.17), so the task of vengeance is left to those who are outside the church. Christians live in peace, take no part in any violence and the true church's peaceful and co-operative lifestyle demonstrates to wider society a different kind of politics. This reading favours pacifism and perhaps anarchism in politics. It does not favour Christian participation in mainstream civil society. This fails to account for the many instances in the New Testament of soldiers and other officers of the Roman state becoming followers of Christ without being expected to give up their service.

It is essential to consider these words of Paul in their context. They come in the middle of a passage challenging believers to be 'a living sacrifice:'

this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

- Romans 12.1-2

Paul then goes on, in chapters 12-14, to expand on the practical ways in which this renewed mind finds expression. As he says in another letter, Christians are to

have the same mindset as Christ Jesus Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

- Philippians 2.5-7

Romans 13.1-7 is *not* an item of political philosophy or social science. Rather it is about how Christians are to frame their relations with the ruling authorities – about the 'mindset,' the assumptions, they carry in their heads when dealing with them. At the end of chapter 12 Paul quotes from the Old Testament book of Proverbs:

*If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head*

- Romans 12.20, quoting Proverbs 25.21-22

and urges Christians 'not to be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12.21).

From this basis Paul turns to the question of dealing with the state. Romans 13 needs to be read in this context. The Roman state compelled obedience through awesome levels of force. Most people

would think it wise not to resist. There is, anyway, Paul says, no mandate for the emergent Christian communities to resist the state. It is a lawful institution, with a God-given right to use force against its subjects. It does not bear the sword in vain.

Paul calls for more than non-resistance. He asks for willing, positive and voluntary submission. This does not necessarily mean obedience. Christians may *submit* to the state's punishment even if they do not *obey* an instruction if such obedience is to deny their faith. Furthermore, the church was itself to be a voluntary, self-regulating association – setting its own conditions of membership, choosing its own leaders and excluding those found to have rejected the rules (1 Corinthians 5).

The picture emerges of Christians as an *uncompelled* people. They are in the church because they choose to be. There is no point in the state trying to compel them. In most matters, Christians do not need to be compelled because they submit as a matter of choice. In a few matters, to do with speaking of Christ, they *cannot* be compelled. Force, in relation to Christians in society, becomes irrelevant. Is this what Paul had in mind by 'overcoming evil with good'?

Conclusions

There is a biblical mandate for human beings to establish states – that is to say, social institutions that have authority to exercise compulsion within defined territory and to enter into reciprocal relations with other states. States are to be properly understood and respected by their populations. The proper relationship between a population and the state is one of informed consent in a framework of the rule of law. There is no mandate for Christians to refuse to submit to the state or to seek to change it by force. Such submission may extend to accepting the consequence of disobedience when compelled to do so. By modelling submission, Christians render the state's use of force superfluous.

The bible does not endorse theocracy, ie a system purporting to be the direct rule of God in the state. Theocracy is idolatry.

We may, finally, observe that rule by popular consent is the historical outcome of long-term Christian presence in society. A careful consideration of the relevant bible texts reveals why this is so.