

God and Nation

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July 7, 2019

I Samuel 8:4-20; Romans 13:1; Rev.13:1-4

Israel and the Church lived over 1,200 years under a variety of political and social arrangements: slavery in Egypt; de-centralized government led by judges with Yahweh as king; monarchy, which traded in Yahweh for a human king; Babylonian exile; self-government for a short while, then domination by a succession of foreign rulers culminating in domination by the Roman Empire whose Caesar was Lord.

Scripture from these thousand plus years can give us some insight on how to live in today's America.

I

The Hebrew text (I Samuel 8:4-20) is a startling warning about Israel's desire to have a king like other nations.

The elders came to Samuel, the judge, and asked for a "king to govern over us." Judgeship in Israel was a form of leadership which oversaw a loose confederation of tribes living under the law of God as given in the Torah. In this

de-centralized form of government the focus was on local economics and the worship of Yahweh as king. Justice and relative economic equality was the goal.

This worked well for awhile, then things began to fall apart. Samuel named his sons as judges, and they were a disaster. They did not follow the ways of Yahweh. Economic disparity began to grow. Threats from other nations around its borders began to make them fearful about their survival.

So the “elders” came to Samuel and asked for a king to govern them, that they maybe a nation like all the other nations of the earth. Two factors were at work. Those who had become wealthy wanted to keep it and thought kingship was the best way to do it. And, the nation was afraid of the military might of the nations around its borders. Greed and Fear were driving their request for a king. Sound familiar?

Samuel was greatly displeased with the request. He prayed to God, and God replied: “They are not rejecting *you*, they are rejecting *me* as their king. Give them what they want, but deliver this warning about the ways of the king.

So Samuel relayed this warning: “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you. He will (listen to the refrain of the verb “take”):

- *Take* your sons and conscript them for his army
- *Take* your daughters to be perfumers, cooks and bakers.

- *Take* the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his rich supporters
- *Take* your male and female men-servants and maid-servants, the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to use for himself.
- *Take* one tenth of your flocks, and you will become his *slaves*.

In other words, *you whom I delivered from slavery in Egypt will have chosen a new kind of slavery.*

Note two things. First, how greed and fear can take over a nation and cause it to abandon the ways of God. Secondly, God will tell us what God desires but will let us have what we want. As the old African proverb says, “The judgment of the gods is that they give us what we ask for.” We live with the terrible and real freedom to choose the ways of God, or to ignore them to our destruction.

II

Now to the N.T. texts. One is from Romans 13, the other is from Revelation 13. When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome he regarded the Roman Empire as a relatively benign governing structure. In his mind the law and order of governments was ordained by God to restrain bad behavior and reward good behavior. The Pax Romana served to give him the freedom to travel the Mediterranean world to spread the gospel. Furthermore, he did not

want Christians in Rome to be open to the charges of insurrection. So he wrote:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God....For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad.

These verses have been used for good and for ill through the centuries. They have been used to defend the divine right of kings, to prop up oppressive regimes and to justify unjust laws. On the other hand, Paul's general words about governing authorities support the idea that part of God's providential care is to create structures that preserve order and protect against evil doers.

However, it wasn't long before Paul himself was imprisoned and most likely died at the violent hands of Nero. So the question comes: what happens when governments are a terror to *good* conduct, when they no longer exercise legitimate power?

So now we turn to Revelation 13, written about 50 years later. The Roman Empire had begun systemic persecution of Christians. The writer of the book of Revelation had been banished from Asia Minor to the Isle of Patmos. He saw the terrifying and evil power of the Empire. He was writing to Christians who lived under the daily threat of death. He wrote in code language—an

animal code, a color code and a numbers code—so to reveal the meaning to Christians and conceal it from Roman authorities.

In Revelation 13 he depicts Rome as the Beast from the Sea. The Beast has ten horns and seven heads, and on the heads were written blasphemous names. The Dragon, or Satan, had given its power and throne to the Beast. And everyone obeyed:

In amazement the whole world followed the Beast. They worshipped the Dragon for he had given his authority to the Beast saying: “Who is like the Beast, and who can fight against it?”

Remember when Satan was tempting Jesus in the wilderness? He said, “If you but worship me I will give you all the kingdoms of the world”. Jesus said no, but there have been, and are now, many waiting to say yes.

The blasphemous names were names the Empire used to proclaim its divinity (for example Caesar as Savior). The citizens were all too ready to bow down to Rome saying “Who is like the Beast”, which is a terrible perversion of the Psalmist’s cry: “Who is like Yahweh, Who can compare to God?”

Paul Tillich the great theologian who escaped Nazi Germany once defined the demonic as anytime some *finite* is taken to be *infinite*. Nazi Germany had become demonic because it took on divine pretension.

III

So, what principles can we discern about God and the Nation from these and other verses in the Bible? Here are some.

- 1) God calls nations and peoples to walk in the ways of God. These ways center on justice, compassion and humility, that is, the acknowledgement of the limits of human power, goodness and wisdom.
- 2) The God of the Bible has instructed nations to take special care of the poor and vulnerable, as in the repeated command to care for widows, orphans and strangers, or immigrants. There are 2,000 verses in the Bible that pertain to care for the poor. And Jesus made it clear in Matthew 25 that nations will be judged by their care for the “least of these”, that is, the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned.
- 3) True prophets, ancient and new, call the nation to its best self, and few are popular in their time. They keep in their pockets the phone number for U-Haul.
- 4) When nations and communities depart from the ways of God they destroy themselves. As Walter Rauschenbusch, the father of the Social Gospel movement in America said, “nations die of legalized injustice.”
- 5) There’s an important difference between a worthy patriotism and an unworthy nationalism. Patriotism is the love of one’s nation and whose love

is at work for the well-being and betterment of the nation. Its ongoing quest is to form a “more perfect union”, to quote the Founding Fathers.

In contrast, nationalism is the worship of the nation as our highest loyalty, thus taking the place of God and God’s values. Humans are inveterate idol-makers, and nationalism is one of the most tempting idolatries.

- 6) When governments enact policies and laws which demean and destroy lives, they must be challenged and resisted.

The young German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived when the Nazis came to power. He watched the growing nationalism and militarism, he saw the persecution of Jews, he watched the Nazi flag brought into Christian worship services and he knew his beloved nation was descending into madness. So he began to oppose his nation’s government in word and deed. He saw how Romans 13 was used to compel the complete obedience of Germans to the Nazi State. He warned against “Fuhrer-worship” where people bowed down to a strong man leader. He saw the German Christian church fall under Hitler’s spell because he promised national greatness and promised to protect and promote the Christian church.

In a letter, Bonhoeffer wrote of the obligation of Christians in relation to the State. The Christian had three responsibilities:

- a) The first was to call the State to be what God had ordained it to be, that is, to maintain justice and stability.
- b) The second was their “unconditional obligation” to come to the aid of the victims of state action, all victims.
- c) The third was not only to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel of the State, but to seize the wheel itself. If a train is hurtling down upon a person we must try to stop it, in his words, “to put a spoke in the wheel.” And so began his opposition to Hitler which led to his execution.
- 7) In America we live not in a monarchy or dictatorship but in a democracy, so it is up to us as citizens who love our country to make it better. Sometimes this implies critique of our nation. Thomas Jefferson promoted the general education of the citizenry so we could better critique our government, for, in his words, “nothing can keep [the nation] right but their own vigilant and distrustful superintendence.” To use the phrases of William Sloane Coffin, as citizens of America we can be “loveless critics”, and we can be “uncritical lovers” but a truer patriotism is the love of the nation which calls it to its best and is willing to carry on a “lovers quarrel” with our nation. So, in a time of caged children and accelerating economic inequality, let us be loving critics. We are becoming a nation *of* the wealthy, *by* the wealthy and *for* the wealthy. In President Jimmy Carter’s recent

words, we have become “an oligarchy with unlimited political bribery.” So let us be involved in loving, patriotic, God-centered action on behalf of our nation. Here are the words of “America the Beautiful”, my favorite national anthem:

O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life.
America! America! God mend thine every flaw.
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.

(Katherine Lee Bates, 1893, 1904)