

Understanding our faith
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Ancient Israel's power politics

Reading

1 Samuel 8:1-22; 2 Samuel 11:1-27; 1 Kings 21:1-29; Jeremiah 7:1-34; Isaiah 40:1-44:28

Teaching

What can we learn from Israel's political experiences?

The story of the liberation of the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt is cited more than any other in the Old Testament as embodying the saving work of God. The God of the Exodus, unlike most other gods, does not exist merely to reinforce the king's power. This God hears the cries of those the powerful treated as non-persons.

The Hebrews did not gain their liberation from slavery and toward freedom through human military might. God miraculously brings about liberation. The center of power in this new society thus lay not with the generals and the warriors, but with the people's God. The people

with the most status are the weaponless prophets, those who best discern the will of the liberating God.

While the Hebrews journeyed toward the promised land, God gave them the law to provide structure for the delivered slaves so they could sustain the effects of that deliverance. The law served the purpose of structuring life toward justice—in contrast with Egypt's injustice.

Following Israel's establishment of their nation in Palestine, the political structure remained decentralized for several generations. However, eventually, crises—internal and external—brought forth a strong desire for a

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more centralized system, anchored around a king. Ultimately, in what follows, even the greatest of the kings, David, acts with profound violence. He takes his captain Uriah's wife, the beautiful Bathsheba, and sees to it that Uriah meets his death in battle.

What follows are several centuries of a sad litany of one corrupt king following another (with few exceptions). David's act of *taking* becomes the norm.

With the prophet Jeremiah, we come to the fulfillment of centuries of warnings. In the generations of power-hungry kings, prophets raised challenges. Turn from God's ways of justice and peace, gather horses and chariots, trust in the sword and you will die by the sword. Israel's great temple meets with destruction in 586 B.C.E. The office of king, the monarchy, stands no more. These central objects of confidence, these signs of God's presence and Israel's identity, lie in ruins.

Out of these ruins, though, a message of hope emerged, articulated most profoundly in Isaiah 40–55. God loves God's people still. The original hope of the Exodus—a community centered around God's love and mercy—received new voice. However, from the time of Jeremiah and Isaiah 40–55 on, this community found its identity not through its linkage with any particular nation state, but as a counter-culture, a creative minority in many different nation states.