

Biblical Kingship

Model for Contemporary Business Leaders

■ by Michael E. Cafferky



A careful study of the biblical references to kingship reveals that accumulation of personal wealth, building military power which could be use to oppress citizens, and convoluted foreign policy were unacceptable. This speaks to our contemporary condition. Furthermore, kings were responsible to, and chosen from, the community, and expected to set a high moral example.

Ask Rupert Murdoch whether or not he desired to limit his marketplace influence and you are likely to get a look of dismay in response. Top-level business leaders like Murdoch will cite legal and economic limitations structured into the marketplace as evidence that no additional obstructions on their influence are needed. The marketplace, though not a perfect control mechanism, does restrict executive behaviours. For this we can be thankful. Nevertheless, some workers are concerned about what appears to be an increasing wage gap between top-level leaders and front-line employees. Others are concerned about the amount of international influence that executives have in the political processes of countries in which their organisations do business. Still others have suffered at the hands of unscrupulous executives who have abused their power. Accordingly, top-level executives are under the spot light of increasing scrutiny because of allegations of abuse of power. Most, not willing to voluntarily limit their power, will do so only under duress after those with more or higher influence insist.

A seldom-used but potentially useful lens through which to consider the debates over leadership abuse of power is that of the biblical idea of kingship. It may not be popular to talk about Christian leadership in terms of *kingly* power and authority. We should honour the king (1 Peter 2:17), pray for the

king (1 Timothy 2:1-2), and obey the king (Ecclesiastes 8:2). If we engage in bad behaviour, we should fear the king (Romans 13:3). Emulating a king comes much farther down the list of what the Christian leader should do. Be like a humble servant, yes (Philippians 2:7-11); behave like a king, well, maybe not. And, for good reason: many of the biblical kings were scoundrels. Earthly monarchs, emperors, dictators, prime ministers, and presidents have not covered themselves in glory. Add to this the many business leaders you probably don't want to work for. We are ambivalent about trusting them as role models.

Nevertheless, in seeking to comprehend leadership from a biblical point of view, as strange as it may seem, leaders would do well to consider the biblical *ideal* of kingship as collateral to commonly cited biblical precepts such as the Golden Rule. This article will survey the elements of biblical kingship that seem applicable to contemporary senior management.

Selection, Anointing and Renewal

Under the model of the ideal kingship not just anyone could become a legitimate king through force of will. The true king is to be chosen by God from the community. Israel's king was to be their kin. However, God works through recognised community leaders to execute his will in the selection process. For



▶▶ example, Samuel is the one who identifies Saul and then David to be the first of Israel's kings.

Although we see evidence in the Bible that ancient Israelite kings had crowns, the main emphasis was on their anointing rather than on the crowning. From one point of view the king was merely one of many, a man representing all citizens. From another point of view, the anointing is an essential characteristic of a king, marking him as in a special relationship with God to be the king and shepherd of Yahweh's people (2 Samuel 5:1-3; Psalm 2:6). In the anointing the emphasis was on God's relationship with the king rather than the king's pre-eminence over his subjects. Anointing was a ceremonial purification rite whereby God's power was



*Samuel anoints David King (1618-19)
Detail of Fresco by Raphael
Palazzi Pontifici, Vatican*

conferred upon him to accomplish all the good envisioned in the covenant promises for the people and for their land.

Anointing by a priest or prophet in the holy city Jerusalem signified that it was God who was anointing this person for service. The king represented his people before God. Anointing made him set apart (holy) in a way similar to that of a priest. Anointing also signified God's blessing and influence in his life. The anointing was a symbol of the transfer of the power of the Holy Spirit onto the king giving him a new heart and divine power to make decisions and take actions – all signifying that he has a new relationship with God. (1 Samuel 10:6, 9)

The anointing occurred at the beginning of his reign and may have been renewed in a ritual of humility where the king was expected to proclaim the spiritual platform of his leadership by making an oath before God, declaring himself to be a faithful follower of God, loyal to the principles of the covenant, and fostering justice throughout the land.

Duty and Role of the King

The primary duty of the Israelite king is significant if we are to draw lessons for contemporary leaders. The primary duty was to administer justice by ensuring that covenant-oriented social policies provided equal access to legal protection for those on the margins of society such as widows and orphans. We often think of the High Priest as fulfilling the role of mediator between God and the people. While this is true, ancient kings also did the work of mediator through their role of preserving the primacy of the Torah in bringing about the life of covenantal shalom for the nation (Psalm 72:4.). The ideal king was truly a prince of peace: his actions were covenantal in nature, bringing the peace of wellbeing, prosperity and harmony to the land that was envisioned in covenant promises (Isaiah 11:1-5). If the state was threatened by external powers, the people expected God to work through the king's political, economic or military influence to save the nation.

The fundamental expectation of the king finds its roots in the directions that Moses provided during his last days as the nation's leader:

Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left; in order that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel. (Deuteronomy 17:14-20) ▶▶

▶▶ A personal copy of the Torah would provide him accessibility to the principles of the law on a daily basis. Copying the manuscript in the presence of the priests would assure the larger community that the king had not changed the law to suit his desires. The king was expected to read the law every day in order to learn piety. This would promote humility, reminding him that he is one from the many in the community.

If the king was to be faithful in leading the nation in following the Torah, his power must be limited to prevent him from becoming a tyrant. He was not authorised to develop such a large standing army which he could then use to rule as a tyrant over the nation. He was not to take into marriage too many daughters of foreign kings since doing so would create too many complicated political entanglements for Israel. He was also limited

the king should extend his influence into other nations at the same time as not becoming entangled in international politics through marriages. Third, the king is an important force for economic prosperity at the same time as not building his personal wealth above his fellow citizens to the point where he can control the economy for his personal interests.

David the Prototype

Just before popular king David died he added to the wise counsel of Moses, proclaiming that God’s intent for national leaders was to fear God, rule over the nation with righteousness, and do good for the nation (2 Samuel 23:1-4). So loved was he that ever after David became the benchmark when considering the characteristics of the ideal king. The ideal king is a person whose heart is transformed by the Holy Spirit, signified

Table 1. Structural Limits on Biblical Kingly Power

POWER SOURCE	STRUCTURAL LIMITS FROM DEUTERONOMY 17:16-17
Horses: Used primarily for military purposes such as pulling chariots	"Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.'" (v. 16)
Wives: Arranging marriages with daughters of foreign kings would increase his power	"Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away" (v. 17)
Wealth: Large amounts of capital would give the king extraordinary power of exclusion over common people	"nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself." (v. 17)

in terms of the wealth he could develop. Such a limitation would prevent him from taking extraordinary control over the economic system so that he could gain power and status above his fellow countrymen. These requirements are summarised in Table 1. Structural Limits on Biblical Kingly Power.

In these structural limitations we see tensions. First, the king should adequately defend the nation against foreign intrusion but at the same time not have such a powerful military that he could use to abuse his power. Second,

by the anointing with oil at the coronation ceremony. He is God’s Anointed One, holy to serve God, the ruler of the whole earth, and the people in a way similar to the priests being anointed for their spiritual service. He is a mediator between God and the nation. His close relationship with God gives him the power to bring peace, wellbeing, justice, and harmony to the land. With the covenant as his guide the king was the protector and restorer of the people not only from foreign powers but also from moral lapses. Under his reign good fortune would result for everyone. ▶▶

▶▶ So marked was the Davidic kingship in the minds of the people that the future hope of the Anointed One came to be seen as a David-like King. The hope of national moral, economic, and political restoration came to be associated with God's Anointed One. The qualities of the ideal king were also applied to the Messiah who was always thought of as a descendant of David, not only in the biological sense but in the spiritual sense; too. When Jesus appeared in Galilee, the people quickly came to associate him with the promise of the Anointed One. This association had deep significance on all who heard him teach or saw him heal. The eschatological hope for one like - and the

Anointed One from - the line of David to return and reign was forever after associated by the Christians with Jesus Christ the Messiah.



Solomon

*Detail from
Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon (1890)
Edward Pointner
(Art Gallery of New South Wales)*

Unfortunately not every king measured up to David's standard. Even David was not always consistent with the ideal. When Israel's kings strayed from their primary calling as mediators of the covenant, they exploited the people and abused their power

(Jeremiah 22:13-14; Ezekiel 34:1-6). Solomon, arguably the most successful in terms of economic development, was the first to ignore the counsel of Moses regarding the limitations on the King. The warnings that Samuel gave the people when the first king was enthroned were fulfilled in Solomon (1 Samuel 8:7-20). He built a large standing army. He took many wives. And he became the wealthiest king Israel would ever know: (1 Kings 10:21-28; 11:1-4, 9-12). He also taxed the people heavily and conscripted slave labour.

Lessons for Contemporary Leaders

If we were to take the biblical ideal for the king and apply it to leaders today, what

leadership traits and behaviours might we expect to see? We should see at least the following applications.

Biblical kings were princes of peace preserving the primacy of the Torah in bringing about the life of covenantal shalom. Following the biblical standard for the ideal king, contemporary leaders will work to develop personal attributes of humility and integrity. From the perspective of morality, the work of the leaders in making decisions and taking actions is primarily a moral activity. Indeed, it is the top-level leader's responsibility to manage the moral values of the organisation. The assumption here is that the moral fabric of the organisation, the same principles at play in the larger community, is the root from which a flourishing tree of shalom grows in all its dimensions: economic, social, political and spiritual. But such flourishing cannot truly be achieved unless leaders also watch out for the interests of those at the economic margins and those who are not at peace with the organisation. Thus, leaders who wish to follow the biblical ideal will pursue protection of the organisation and its goals but not at the expense of the least advantaged.

Senior leaders will develop a confident but humble understanding that goals are achieved not because of their personal attributes and actions but because the whole community subjects itself to higher moral principles. This will require that everyone be willing to be changed. In this personal change leaders must take the lead. Successful leaders' willingness to be transformed will equal their desire for their organisations to be transformed. The leader will come to understand his or her spiritual calling and how this calling is to be used in service to others.

The main emphasis of the anointing and annual renewal of the king was on God's relationship with the king rather than the king's pre-eminence over his subjects. In terms of leader behaviours think how a leader's experience would change if he or she participated in an annual service of humility ▶▶

▶▶ where at that service followers subject the leader to open questions regarding the leader's behaviour in terms of moral principles. Many contemporary leaders are comfortable calling a town-hall style meeting to discuss the organisational issues and strategic decisions. Most would avoid personal questions; most subordinates would avoid asking such questions for fear of reprisal. Senior leaders can achieve this level of openness and integrity only by being firmly and confidently rooted in a standard of morality outside themselves – a standard that is embraced by followers.

The leader will foster long-term covenantal relationships with followers and those outside the organisation. A covenant relationship is deeper than one that is based on obligations to perform tasks in exchange for payment.

In a covenant relationship, both parties attempt to build trust and loyalty. This requires time. Both seek to do things that will enhance the relationship rather than merely fulfill a list of obligations in a contract. In a covenant, the relationship is paramount and needs faithfulness, nurturing, and loving kindness.

Another structural limitation on kingly power placed a limit on the degree of personal economic control that the leader could build. Instead, the king was the one charged with watching out for the economic interests of the community as a whole. It is in community flourishing that true wealth in all its dimensions can be enjoyed by the king and his family. Following the biblical model senior managers will be as interested in growing the balance sheet of not only their organisation but also of the communities in which the organisation serves. Augmenting their salaries will come secondary to the interests of the broader community since it is the community they serve.



New standards of morality
Shareholder questioning Bank of Ireland management at their annual meeting

Biblical kings were called upon to limit the number of marriages as this tended to draw away the heart of the king from following God. At stake in ancient times was the network of international political relations that could preserve the domestic community's ability to pursue flourishing shalom in safety. The more wives that a king gathered, each from a different neighbouring nation, the more likely the king would put himself into a position where he must compromise the principles of justice and righteousness (the

two principles upon which his throne was based) in domestic relations in order to satisfy the complicated competing interests in the international arena. One contemporary application of this is in the arena of interlocking boards of directors. Participating as a member of many boards of directors increases the risk that conflicts of interest will arise, making it more difficult for the leader to

pursue principles of justice and righteousness on behalf of the organisation which employs the leader.

A major theme in the biblical ideal is that of community. Biblical kings were chosen by God from among the community. From one point of view the top-level leader is simply one person from the community of workers who share the interdependent relationships needed to accomplish organisational goals. Such a person, cognisant of the community served and mindful of the responsibilities that come with a close relationship with God, will desire to emulate the principles of the Torah that are expected of followers, indeed will share leadership with the community served. Leadership is not about gathering more power for personal ends, but rather is about growing the power of the community as a whole to pursue the goals of the community. Perhaps what is needed to emulate the ideal biblical kingship is for leaders to be willing to develop the humility required to make structural limits on their power over the communities they serve. ■

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