

“A King for the Ages?”

Isaiah 11:1-10

Throughout much of history, reaching back into far antiquity nations have been ruled single-handedly by one person, referred to as a monarch. Some of the earliest civilizations that we know of had a monarch with complete control over the domain that under his possession. In our modern society, there are a handful of complete monarchs left in the world since many other governments have a completely different structure than in the ancient world.

Yet there are still entities in this world that still bear much similarity to the extent of power that monarchies had in the past. While we may not have a very good conception of a King in our post-modern American society, we can learn from the past and get a concept of what it must have been like to have a King in society.

To understand a King concept in the ancient world, we must look back into history at the ancient Near East, the land of our spiritual ancestors. This is applicable to us today, as we use the image of a King to be a way that we describe our savior Jesus Christ. For us to understand the prophecy and nature of Christ it is indeed very critical to examine the concept of an ancient Near Eastern King or ruler.

The region that we know of as the Ancient Near East is composed of many lands. These lands ranged from Egypt over to Mesopotamia and up to Anatolia and down to parts of the Arabian peninsula. These are the modern day nations of Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. In our modern day these are often referred to as the Middle East. The reason scholars of the ancient world center the world around Greece, rather than Western Europe. If you are living in Greece in the ancient world, then lands mentioned would not be that far away from you at all.

The most noted rulers that we have had a major impact in our conception of Ancient Near Eastern rulers' center around the Pharaohs of Egypt and on to the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Persian rulers. The common thread between all of these rulers is that they were thought to be divine and were living, physical Gods who had absolute authority over their kingdom's and domain.

This creates an interesting theological and political system for those who lived in their lands. The state and religion were one entity. This is different from our post-enlightenment world where we can separate religion away from other parts of our lives. For the ancients, there was no distinction. To go against the ruler was to go against your religion. The divine rule of Kings was taken to the furthest extent possible. The rulers used this power to keep a firm grip on their lands and make sure that they would remain at the top of their society. No one would dare to challenge a living god in the ancient Near East. To do so would be near suicide, because there would be plenty of individuals willing to come after you if you denied the divine rule of these Kings.

It should be noted that in these societies mentioned they were all polytheistic with many gods and goddesses in their religion. There was a god for everything in the natural world and a god for all aspects of society. In some parts of the ancient world, such as in the lands of Greece, there would even be a monument to the unknown god because the ancients wanted to make sure that all gods and goddesses would receive their due worship and that the followers would be blessed richly by the objects of their adoration.

One culture that has the most profound impact on us to this day, because of our religious heritage, is that of ancient Israel. Following the Exodus out of Egypt, there was a not a set ruler for the Israelite people. They did not have a single leader that they could stand with in times of

trouble and in times of plenty. The Israelites were gathered into tribes where there were distinct leadership profiles in those communities.

There was a time though when in times of threat by other military powers there would be the need to form a united front against invaders. The tribes recognized if they did not gather together, there was the distinct possibility that they would all be wiped off the map from existence. This is when the Judges of the Hebrew Scriptures came about.

The Judges, such as Abimelek, Gideon, Samson, and were first and foremost military leaders. It was their task to rally the troops and ensure that the safety of the Israelites would remain. The Israelite tribes were not a major military power, so they had quite the task ahead of them. They believed that God was on their side and through God they would find victory over their heathen challengers. It is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures that there were victories that show how God was on their side. God is indeed a very powerful figure in the ideas of military conquest.

Yet after many victories and many judges, the Israelites began to call for a King. They wanted to be like their neighbors and have a King that would rule over them. A king would make the Israelite tribes united under a single banner and would make the claims of the Israelites on their land and culture legitimate in the eyes of their neighbors. If they were to survive as a culture and move forward in life, they people saw that they needed a King to rule over them.

Now take the notion of what the other Ancient Near Eastern cultures believed about a King. They believed that Kings were living Gods. This idea was not going to work with the Israelites as they believed in one God, the supreme God of all. A king could not have a divine aspect to their rule. So the religious leaders felt that they could have a King if God would appoint

a man to fill that position. The King would not be divine, but it would centralize power and authority in one person, rather than being spread about all the independent tribes.

This brings us to the period of the United Monarchy. There were only three united monarchy kings, which were Saul, David, and Solomon. These were men that were appointed by prophets and other religious leaders. They were chosen because they were the example of what an Israelite should be.

The most celebrated King was indeed David, for he ruled at a prosperous period. He chose Jerusalem to be his capital and brought the Covenant to Jerusalem where he would be close to the divine power of the Israelites. It was believed that David would ensure that there would be unity of God's people. David was a proud person, for he felt that he was divinely blessed. Yet as we know today, David was not the most holy of people. He did things that a person who was to represent God should not have done, and those acts go on beyond the scope of this sermon.

So I have given you a crash course on the monarchy of the ancient near east and the united monarchy of Israel. What does this have to do with Jesus Christ? What does this have to do as we wait for our savior to come into our lives and bring us the joy and full life in our God?