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Biblical Politics: Where Were the Elders?



Abstract: This article suggests that because the biblical authors were largely silent about the “elders,” arguably among the more significant political actors of ancient Israel, and certainly the most enduring, they may not have been as concerned with politics as we otherwise have thought. The “elders” are mentioned some 140 times in the Bible and almost invariably in a political context, and yet their political function and their place in the “constitution” are at best enigmatic. Presented as the keynote address at the September 2008 conference on political Hebraism, this article provides a novel approach to the question of whether the Bible has a political teaching, usually addressed with reference to kings, laws, or prophets.

I.

It isn't easy, reading the biblical texts, to figure out how authority was actually exercised in ancient Israel, how politics “worked,” or how it was imagined to work, at the local as well as the national level: who did what to whom? The prophets provide a rhetorically powerful answer to that question, which is also, I am sure, a true answer: powerful men grind the faces of the poor. But that is what (some) powerful men always do, or try to do. We want to know more: Who were the powerful men? How did they get that way? How successfully did they use their power? Were the poor ever able to resist? Who, besides the prophets, spoke for them? These questions cannot be answered for Israel in the way they can be answered for ancient Greece or Rome, or medieval Europe, or the modern state. Legal and administrative records have not survived, and the literature that has survived, while it contains many narratives of political action, is rarely focused on the big political questions: What is the best regime? How should political decisions be made? What are the obligations of citizens/subjects? The truth is that politics—at least secular, everyday politics, the management of our common affairs—is not

recognized by the biblical writers as a centrally important or humanly fulfilling activity.

For this reason, most of the political actors in the biblical histories remain shadowy figures. We know something, obviously, about Israel's kings. As in many other cultures, the king's court and his family are subjects of great interest, though this is closer to what is today called "human interest" than it is to political interest. The extended story of the struggle to succeed David is certainly a political story, but we should note that none of the biblical writers ever comments on it or tries to draw theoretical or practical conclusions from it. David's lament for Absalom is the only commentary we have on the most memorable of biblical rebellions. For the rest, we know very little about the status and work of those royal officials for whose support David and his son were presumably competing, who are variously referred to as princes, rulers, chiefs, governors, and masters of the palace, and we don't know much more about the king's judges and scribes—shadows all. But the most interesting shadows are the elders, and I want to focus on the elders today as a way of addressing the question, how engaged were the biblical writers with political life?

Elders of different sorts are mentioned some 140 times in the Bible, and in only a small number of these cases is the reference nonpolitical, to old men or women generally. Mostly, the elders are a group with a role to play, whose presence is required for some purpose. They are "elders of"—of Israel, Judah, Jerusalem; of the people, the land, the city, the priests. The phrase suggests a representative office and a sphere of responsibility. Elders were present at some of the most crucial events in the history of Israel: they played a leading part in the Sinai covenanting and some less-defined part in the great covenant renewals described in the books of Joshua and II Kings (but not in Nehemiah). They seem to have ruled Israel, if anyone did, after Joshua's death—at least locally and for everyday purposes. They formed the delegation that came to Samuel to demand a king, which is, perhaps, the key political moment in biblical history. They covenanted with David and "anointed [him] king over Israel." They joined the procession that carried the ark to Solomon's temple. But who exactly were they? And what did they do, what were they supposed to do, in between their textual appearances?

In fact, we hardly know what they did when they appear; we are told of their presence, only rarely of their actions or opinions. Insofar as they speak (in front of Samuel, for example, or at the "trial" of Jeremiah), it is always with one voice; we never hear elders arguing with one another or even talking to one another. The very first appearance of the elders—in this case, "the elders of Israel"—is a paradigmatic example of how they are treated by the biblical writers. In Exodus 3:16–18, Moses is com-

manded by God to gather the elders, tell them of the coming deliverance, and go with them to confront Pharaoh. So the elders are duly gathered, in accordance with God's instructions, but when Moses gets to the palace, they seem to have disappeared: "And afterward, Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh...." A rabbinic commentator asks, "Where were the elders?" and goes on to suggest that they had gone along with Moses and Aaron at first but then "stealthily slipped away, one by one...."¹ Slaves still, they were afraid to challenge their master. This is a nice, possibly insightful story about the psychological effects of slavery. It is equally possible, however, that the narrator simply takes the presence of the elders for granted; they are not mentioned because they have nothing to do or say. They are silent witnesses, standing in for the people as a whole.

This seems to be a part they frequently played, most clearly at the covenant renewals (though some part of "the people" were also present on those occasions). But they could not have played this part unless they also had some more substantive responsibilities. I am not going to try to say what those responsibilities really were; that is a task for historians of ancient Israel (and Hanoch Reviv has written an excellent historian's book about the elders, treating the text as a series of clues to what was happening, so to speak, behind the text).² I only want to know what the biblical writers tell us, and don't tell us, about these officials, if that is what they were. I shall respect the reticence of the writers, but not so much as to deny myself the chance to question and explain it. Assume for now that the elders were significant actors in Israel's politics; otherwise they would not appear so frequently in the texts. Why, then, are we told so little about them? Who were the elders? Where were they?

II.

Their name implies that they were the leaders of kin groups, patriarchs (the Hebrew noun is always masculine), who regularly acted together (the noun is always plural). Individual elders may have exercised authority over their own families or clans; in all the settings noticed by the biblical writers, "the elders" form a group. They come and go together, are consulted together (when they are consulted), are witnesses together, speak, as I have already noted, with a single voice. Only rarely, however, do we get a glimpse of an assembly of elders—and these cases have mostly to do with war, when the elders (in Chronicles, they are called

¹ Exodus Rabba 5:14.

² Hanoch Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel: A Study of a Biblical Institution*, trans. Lucy Plitmann (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989).

“chiefs of the fathers” or “heads of the children”) are presented as leading the tribal muster and counseling the king about military matters. It is possible that in pre-monarchic Israel, the tribal confederation was represented by some sort of occasional assembly. Thus an obscure (and disputed) passage in the blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33:5:

Then [God] became King in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people assembled, the tribes of Israel together.

But in none of the biblical texts is there anything like an institutionalized assembly, meeting regularly, with members chosen in such and such a way. No doubt, there were meetings of elders, but not of such a kind (or not dealing with subjects of such a kind) as to attract the interest of our authors. The standard biblical reference is not to the assembly, or congregation, or council of *elders*. The preposition always comes after the noun: *elders of*; the elders are always part of some larger whole, though their relation to the whole and to its other parts is radically unclear. Attempts to place the elders within a larger constitutional structure invariably misrepresent the openness of that reiterated preposition.

Consider, for example, “the elders of the city,” who are most frequently mentioned in Deuteronomy, where they are assigned certain adjudicative responsibilities having to do with both criminal and civil (in this case, marriage) law. They act alongside judges and priests, but with their own specific tasks and not, except in our construction, as members of a legal or administrative hierarchy. Nothing is said about how “the elders of the city” are chosen from among all the elders in the city. The book of Ruth provides the only account of elders’ actually performing one of the tasks assigned in Deuteronomy—acting as witnesses to a refusal (or, apparently, an acceptance) of levirate obligations. The witnesses are chosen, seemingly at random, by Boaz, the second surviving brother, who intends to meet the obligations:

And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, sit ye down here [in the gate]. And they sat down.³

Any group of ten will do, apparently; this is obviously not a regular session of city elders.

It must have been a more determinate group of “elders of Gilead” who carried on the negotiations with Jephthah in Judges 11. Unlike Boaz, Jephthah didn’t pick the men he dealt with; they approached him—I will say more about this passage later on—and the promises they made implied

³ Ruth 4:2.

a representative role for themselves. Their agreement with Jephthah is subsequently ratified by a larger group:

Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them.⁴

We can imagine here an executive committee of elders and a popular assembly of male heads of families or of male warriors (“the people”). The elders have negotiating powers; the people have the power of ratification. Baruch Halpern has argued that this is the standard constitutional pattern in ancient Israel, but there are too few examples of, and too many exceptions to, this putative pattern: the argument is plausible, I suppose, but radically uncertain.⁵ In any case, we are given no information at all as to how the executive committee was chosen, or who its members were. The really important question is why the biblical writers had so little interest in the “constitution.”

Halpern’s pattern isn’t visible in what must be the critical case: the acceptance of David as king by the northern tribes:

So all the elders of Israel came to the king, to Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them in Hebron before the Lord: and they anointed David king over Israel.⁶

The people aren’t mentioned here. On the other hand, the elders aren’t mentioned in the account of the formal appointment of Solomon as David’s successor, which is the work of courtier priests and prophets together with the palace guard; the people appear at the last minute not to confirm but merely to acclaim the new king:

And they blew the trumpet; and all the people said, “God save King Solomon.”⁷

Where were the elders?

Once the monarchy was established, the role of the elders at the national level seems to have been largely, if not entirely, advisory and ceremonial. But their appearances in the first and second books of Kings are too infrequent to say even that with certainty. It is useful here to compare two narratives of Ahab’s wars with Aram (Syria), in I Kings 20 and 22. In chapter 20, Benhadad, the king of Aram, demanded a heavy

⁴ Judges 11:11.

⁵ Baruch Halpern, *The Constitution of the Monarchy in Israel* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), pp. 198–206.

⁶ II Samuel 5:3.

⁷ I Kings 1:39.

tribute from Israel, and Ahab “called all the elders of the land” to advise him on how to respond.

And all the elders and all the people said unto him, “Hearken not unto him, nor consent.”⁸

Where the people came from is unclear, since only the elders had been called. Perhaps the people were there only by virtue of representation; their opinion is included in that of the elders. Or perhaps the “call” was a military call-up, and the advice was given by the officers and endorsed by the soldiers. All that the author of Kings wants us to know, however, is that Ahab did not act without consulting (some of) his subjects. Having done that, he fought a successful war. Three years later, in chapter 22, Ahab was ready to fight again, this time in alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah. At Jehoshaphat’s request, the two kings sought out the prophets, “inquiring” of the Lord. They got conflicting responses from Ahab’s four hundred court prophets and from the solitary Micaiah, son of Imlah, and then they decided for themselves.

Where were the elders? Did elders and prophets compete for the king’s attention? How did the king decide whether to seek advice from the representatives of the people (if that’s what the elders were) or from the prophets of the Lord? Certainly, no constitutional requirements emerge from these two narratives. What does emerge is the radical disinterest of the narrator in the constitution.

Were the elders genuine representatives (or only witnesses, as in Ruth)? Even on ceremonial occasions, it is not apparent that they stood in place of some larger group. Consider the first two verses of II Kings 23, which begin the account of Josiah’s covenant renewal:

And the king sent, and they gathered unto him all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. And the king went up into the house of the Lord, and all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the people both small and great...

Why were the elders summoned first? Josiah apparently had nothing to ask of them, nothing for them to do. And where were the elders when everyone else went up to the Temple? II Chronicles 34:29–30 gives the same account of Josiah’s covenanting, except that the prophets disappear and are replaced by the Levites. What the relation of the elders was to any of these groups remains obscure. When everyone was present, whom did

⁸ I Kings 20:8.

the elders represent? If they had no representative role, why aren't they simply included in the historian's list of people who "went up"?

III.

It is a popular and attractive idea, suggested, for example, by Yehezkel Kaufmann, that the elders carry forward into the monarchic period the "primitive democracy" of Israel's early history.⁹ They are a democratic constraint on the king's power, as the priests are an aristocratic constraint. If the priests are more important in palace politics (Zadok and Solomon, Jehoiada and Joash), the elders are more important locally. They are close to the people; they rule in the city gates; and on national occasions, they represent all those men and women who stay home in Israel's villages and small towns. The picture in II Kings 6:32 of the elders of Dothan sitting with Elisha, the plebian folk prophet, fits reasonably well with this theory. So does the simplicity and informality conveyed by the story of Ruth—though Boaz was a wealthy man, and the ease of his relationship with the elders might well point to something other than democracy. Indeed, the theory of a democratic eldership is fanciful.

We have no historical account of Israel's "primitive democracy." The eldership is very old, and "elders of..." make fairly regular appearances in all the biblical writings, beginning with the account of bondage in Egypt. Moses' effort in Exodus (following the advice of Jethro) to replace the elders with appointed "rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens"¹⁰ seems to have failed. Later on, the king's mercenaries had rulers of this sort, but the people as a whole are never again said to be organized in accordance with Jethro's advice. Even the Deuteronomic re-statement of Exodus 18 makes a subtle but significant concession to elderly and kin group authority. The earlier account says, "And Moses chose able men out of all Israel," implying a meritocratic selection, whereas in Deuteronomy, Moses says, "So I took the chiefs of your tribes, wise men, and known..."¹¹ implying the acceptance of traditional authority. Why should we imagine these tribal chiefs as democratic leaders? Perhaps they are called wise because they are chiefs. Perhaps they are chiefs because their families are rich and powerful. Even then, of course, they might command the respect of ordinary Israelites. And

⁹ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 256, 262.

¹⁰ Exodus 18:19–25.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 1:15.

they might well represent the interests not only of their own families but also of their clans or tribes.

It is, perhaps, a small sign that the elders did play a representative and popular role in the minds of the biblical writers that they hardly ever figure in prophetic denunciations of the powers that be. Kings, priests, prophets, and judges are all condemned; the elders are rarely even mentioned. It may be, again, that the prophets did not think them important: they didn't share the power of the powers that be. Alternatively, Isaiah's one attack may tell the whole story:

The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders of his people, and the princes thereof: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses.¹²

Once again, we know so little about the elders that we can construct "reality" in any way we wish. But "primitive democracy" is an especially hard construction given that the texts contain nothing remotely resembling a doctrinal defense of popular government. Certainly, the idea that "the voice of the people is the voice of God" is unknown to the biblical writers. In the Bible, the voice of God is the voice of God. He speaks to Moses and the prophets and through them to the people. The people are consistently pictured as standing, often willfully, at a distance. In accordance with this picture, we might say that the elders most faithfully represent the people when they repudiate God's rule and ask for a king. God does indeed tell Samuel at that moment to "heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you,"¹³ and Samuel does what he is told, though he later criticizes the people for their "wicked" request.¹⁴ But it would be hard to find another time when the people are similarly "heeded"—in truth, they have very little to "say" in the rest of the biblical histories and no institutional occasion to speak up. Curiously, Samuel doesn't call the elders "wicked," despite the fact that they are more forcefully present here than in any of their other textual appearances. They are representatives of some sort, but they are never recognized as the political force that democracy, even primitive democracy, requires.

We might nonetheless read many of the references to Israel's elders as if they reflected a certain modest democratic idea: that, on secular matters at least, the people or their representatives should be consulted and perhaps even obeyed. (God does, after all, give the people a king against his better judgment.) But that "should" is never explicitly stated, never

¹² Isaiah 3:14.

¹³ I Samuel 8:7.

¹⁴ I Samuel 12:17.

given doctrinal articulation; the biblical writers never seem embarrassed or dismayed when they describe political decisions made in the absence of elders and people alike. And these include some of the most consequential decisions of Israel's (here, Judah's) kings: Hezekiah's rejection of the Assyrian demand for surrender and Zedekiah's rebellion against Babylonian rule. In both these cases, prophets were consulted, elders were not. (Where were the elders?) And the two kings, though one of them follows prophetic advice and the other doesn't, stand alike under the doctrinal demand that God's prophets *should* be heeded. The advice of the elders, sometimes solicited and sometimes not, carries no such authority.

It seems likely that the eldership became newly important in the years of the exile and after—revived, it may be, by the collapse of the monarchy. “The elders of Israel” who sit in Ezekiel's house and listen to his prophecies (Ezekiel 8:1) recall the elders who sat with Elisha; no similar alliance is attested for any of the prophets between these two. And it is the elders again who are said to have been strengthened by the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah and enabled to complete the Second Temple.¹⁵ While the elders are prominent in the book of Ezra, they don't appear at all in Nehemiah, whose author refers instead to “nobles” and “rulers” (these may be the same people—elders all—or maybe not). It makes sense that the disappearance of the king's household would make the other households, and their male heads, more visible. But the government of the Israelites returning from exile is hardly democratic. The texts seem to emphasize the autocratic character of Nehemiah's rule (Morton Smith plausibly compares him to his contemporaries, the Greek tyrants).¹⁶ This time the elders are *there*, at least in the text of Ezra, but who they were and what powers they exercised are not revealed.

IV.

The minds and hearts of the biblical writers were not engaged by the elders. The office and the officeholders were treated casually, partly, I am sure, because readers were expected to have firsthand knowledge about them. But I think that there is another reason for this neglect, which has to do with the secular and non-covenantal character of the eldership. It is true, indeed, that seventy “elders of Israel” participated in some sort of covenantal meal on Mount Sinai, along with Moses and Aaron:

¹⁵ Ezra 6:14.

¹⁶ Morton Smith, *Political Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 103–104.

“They saw God and did eat and drink.”¹⁷ But the elders don’t derive their authority from the Sinai revelation; they were already present in Egypt, despite their nonappearance at the meeting with Pharaoh. They marked the houses of the Israelites with blood in Exodus 12; they broke bread with Jethro, according to Exodus 18, just before his extraordinary proposal to choose “rulers of thousands” and so on—as if the elders weren’t standing right there! The eldership is the only one of Israel’s offices that has no biblical founding. It is not established by covenant, like the monarchy and the priesthood; its members are not called, like the prophets; nor is there a divine command, as with judges, that they be appointed. Whether or not it is a democratic office, it is certainly a “primitive” office, that is, an early and ancient one. Even in Deuteronomy, where elders are mentioned more often than in any other biblical book and assigned specific tasks in the legal system, their existence is simply assumed.

Though they are present at the covenantings, their activities, when we are told what it is they do, are consistently secular. They negotiate on questions of security with judges like Gideon and Jephthah. They act as low-level judicial officers in matters of criminal and civil law. They give “counsel” on matters of policy (contrasted by Ezekiel with the “vision” of the prophets and the “law” of the priests, both of which are divine in origin).¹⁸ They ask Samuel for a king to rule them like the other nations. They consult (sometimes) with Ahab about war and peace. They recall a crucial precedent at the “trial” of Jeremiah (but play no further part in the proceedings). None of this is unimportant, obviously, but it is reported without comment; no effort is made in any of the biblical texts to describe the work of the elders in general terms or to fix their place in the political (or legal) hierarchy.

Even more interesting than this omission, it seems to me, is the nonappearance of the elders in the messianic visions. They have no place at all, it seems, in the days to come. “Your old men shall dream dreams,” Joel says,¹⁹ but though he uses the Hebrew word that is commonly translated as “elders,” it is clear that he is referring to all the old men and not to some set of officeholders. The sole reference to elders in the visions of the prophets occurs in Isaiah 24:23, describing a future time:

when the Lord of hosts shall reign in Mount Zion, and in Jerusalem,
and before his elders gloriously.

¹⁷ Exodus 24:11.

¹⁸ See Ezekiel 7:26.

¹⁹ Joel 2:28.

But these are God's elders, not Israel's—Isaiah is probably referring to a group that appears occasionally in other prophetic writings: “the elders of the priests.” Priests certainly have a place in the messianic age, and so do prophets, though there are suggestions that both these specialized roles will be abolished: all Israel will offer sacrifices and will prophesy. “Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!” says Moses in Numbers 11:29. Kings have a central place, at least in some of the visionary futures. Judges, too, make an occasional appearance, since justice must be done, even in messianic times. In Isaiah 2, God is judge of the nations; in Ezekiel's visions, the priests seem to double as judges. But where are the elders? Will their specialized tasks, whatever they are, be shared among all the people? We will all grow old, but will we all be elders in the days to come?

I suspect that the eldership has no place in messianic time because it has no specifically religious meaning or function. Anciently established and familiar to the people, it could not be expunged from the historical record. The elders, moreover, may have been useful participants in (or witnesses to) the covenantings. Perhaps we are told that they were there in order to strengthen our sense that we were also there—and are bound vicariously by their presence. But the eldership had no further or future purpose, and all its secular functions were simply of no interest, beside the point. In a divine politics and a theological history, elders, without charisma or calling or divine appointment, were entirely superfluous. In any of the biblical accounts of holiness, they derived from a time before Israel became a holy nation. Whatever their actual role in Israel's politics, they are not part of the main story.

The main story could, of course, have been told differently—and, I suspect, sometimes it was told differently. First Maccabees, written only a little too late to be considered for canonization, suggests the possibility, and long passages surviving in the Bible record the secular history of Israel as it must have been understood by some group of Israelite writers (and, presumably, readers). The founding of the monarchy and the story of the Davidic succession, to which I have already referred, are prime examples, and it is worth noting the prominence of the elders in these examples—confronting Samuel, counseling Absalom, and negotiating David's return to Jerusalem. Chronicles doesn't mention the demand of the elders for a king, and it reduces the succession narrative to a single line: “When David was old, and full of days, he made Solomon his son king over Israel.”²⁰ This is sacred history without any politics at all, without rebellion, without negotiation—and without the elders.

²⁰ I Chronicles 23:1.

The book of Judges brings the two possible histories, religious and secular, into sharp focus. According to the narrative frame, God “raises up” each successive judge-deliverer. Why then does Jephthah have to negotiate the terms of his employment with the elders of Gilead? The Gideon story is closer to our expectations about how divine deliverance should work:

the spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet...
And he sent messengers,²¹

and all the people gathered around him. Jephthah, by contrast, is called to a job interview—not with God but with the tribal elders. The Israelites had already assembled, on their own, waiting only for a military commander; the elders functioned as a search committee.²² Clearly, the Jephthah story was originally written outside the “deliverance” frame. It suggests the possibility of a different kind of history, in which politics as human contrivance would play a larger part—and so would actors like the elders. Israel might have had a complete rather than fragmentary and intermittent history of this kind, except that the crucial historians or the last editors, who assembled the available materials and discarded whatever didn’t suit their purposes, were theologically committed. Had a secular political history been written, or had it been fully preserved, we would probably know far more than we do about Israel’s constitutional arrangements, the limits on royal authority, the rival power centers, the nature of political conflict, the relation of local and national officials. We would probably know exactly where the elders were, who they were, and what they did.

V.

In conclusion, I want to consider a text that might have served the cause of a secular politics but didn’t: the lines in Deuteronomy 17:14–17 on kingship, which read like a commentary on or revision of I Samuel 8.

If, after you have entered the land... and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, “I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me,” you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you....
Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to

²¹ Judges 7:34–35.

²² Judges 10:17–18.

Egypt to add to his horses.... And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray, nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess.

The crucial words here are “if... you decide,”²³ which suggest the possibility of a political decision made without divine instruction—exactly the kind of decision that the elders made when they came to Samuel and asked for a king. And though the text then says that God will choose the particular ruler, as he indeed did in the cases of Saul and David, it continues, without noticing the contradiction, to warn the people against choosing a foreigner to rule over them—as if the choice were theirs to make.

The sole biblical reference back to this text comes in the account of Solomon’s reign, which deals explicitly but not always critically with horses, wives, and silver and gold. Though Solomon kept “many horses,” to the number of forty thousand according to I Kings 5, he is actually praised for that. His military prowess made for peace: “All the days of Solomon, Judah, and Israel from Dan to Beersheba, dwelt in safety, everyone under his own vine and under his own fig tree.”²⁴ Solomon also acquired great wealth, but not only for himself: “The king made silver as plentiful in Jerusalem as stones....”²⁵ These two are clearly not critical passages. Solomon is condemned for “loving many foreign women” and taking many wives and allowing them to “turn his heart away” from the worship of Israel’s God. He is also criticized, though only after his death, for the “harsh labor and the heavy yoke” that he laid upon the people—which might be taken as a violation of the closing injunction in Deuteronomy 17 that the king should “not act haughtily toward his fellows.” Interestingly, it is “the elders” who advise Rehoboam, Solomon’s successor, to lighten the burden on his subjects, and who provide a very good, prudential reason for doing so: “If you will be a servant to your people today... they will be your servants always.”²⁶ Rehoboam instead takes the harsh and reckless advice of “the young men who had grown up with him”—the only example in the Bible of intergenerational political disagreement. God’s prophets give no advice in this case; it is an entirely secular argument.

But in the rest of the Deuteronomic histories, covering some three hundred years of monarchic rule, kings are criticized only for religious failings—never because they built too large an army (acquiring too

²³ Though this translation is famously disputed; see, for example, *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 20b.

²⁴ I Kings 5:5.

²⁵ I Kings 10:27.

²⁶ I Kings 12:7.

many horses and chariots) or amassed too much wealth or acted haughtily toward their fellows. Perhaps Deuteronomy 17 was meant to be an authoritative text, but in practice, even in the practice of historical judgment, it seems to have had no authority. One reason for this is that the text doesn't recognize any group of officeholders who might set limits on what kings can do. Clearly, the elders have no such role. They are advisers at best, and advisers only when kings ask for their advice. Rehoboam "took counsel with the elders" but didn't listen to them. Most of the time, the biblical writers don't notice whether the elders give counsel or don't, or whether they say this or that. For our authors, or for most of them, politics exists in another dimension, where secular advice and prudential considerations have no value.

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