

# THE SERVANT KING

*Graham Kendrick*

From Heaven, You came helpless babe  
Entered our world, your glory veiled  
Not to be served but to serve  
And give Your life that we might live

*This is our God, The Servant King  
He calls us now to follow Him  
To bring our lives as a daily offering  
Of worship to The Servant King*

There in the garden of tears  
My heavy load he chose to bear  
His heart with sorrow was torn  
"Yet not My will but Yours", He said

Come see His hands and His feet  
The scars that speak of sacrifice  
Hands that flung stars into space  
To cruel nails surrendered

So let us learn how to serve  
And in our lives enthrone Him  
Each other's needs to prefer  
For it is Christ we're serving

# BIBLICAL LAW AND THE SERVANT QUEEN

*Jonathan Burnside*

## PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL LAW, JONATHAN BURNSIDE EXPLAINS WHY QUEEN ELIZABETH II UPHOLDS THE BIBLICAL IDEAL OF SERVANT MONARCHY

Alfred the Great. Edward the Confessor. The Virgin Queen. It remains to be seen what sobriquet history will bestow on our longest-serving monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, but it would be fitting if posterity crowned her by following the styling she has chosen for herself. This is reflected in the message to her subjects on the eve of the 70th anniversary of her Accession to the throne where she signed herself, simply: 'Your Servant, Elizabeth R.' Queen Elizabeth II's distinctive devotion to duty will justly be praised during her platinum celebrations. Yet the notion of the servant monarch hasn't blown in through the window. Instead, it is rooted in ideas of kingship found in the laws of biblical Israel, including the laws of the king in Deuteronomy. Along with other biblical laws, these have played a determining role in shaping our ideas about the authority and legitimacy of the Crown. They have been an inspiration to some rulers (like King Alfred) and a rebuke to others (like King John). The life and reign of Queen Elizabeth II can be seen as a compelling example of the ideal of servant monarchy, as reflected in biblical law. But we can't have the fruit without

the root. As we commemorate Queen Elizabeth's outstanding achievements, we should also celebrate the biblical ideals of good government, and contend for them, because we cannot take them for granted.

## THE SERVANT KING IN DEUTERONOMY

Remarkably, the biblical idea of monarchy rejected ways of conceptualising kingship then current in the ancient Near East. The Deuteronomic laws of the king prohibited a foreigner from becoming king; instead, in classic covenantal style, they stipulated that the king must be a 'brother' Israelite (Deuteronomy 17:15). He must be subject to the covenant between God and Israel. In addition, this 'brotherly king' was limited in terms of how monarchical power was conventionally displayed.

First, the Israelite king was not allowed to acquire 'many horses for himself' (Deuteronomy 17:16), thus preventing the king from developing an elite military class in the form of a royal chariot force. Like the insistence on 'brotherhood,' the prohibition speaks volumes about Deuteronomy's concern to preserve the social egalitarianism of the Exodus, according to which all of the children of Israel were equally indebted to God's saving action on their behalf. This is underlined by the very next verse, which states that the king shall not 'cause the

people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again' (Deuteronomy 17:16). The fear is that the king will reverse what God has done for Israel in the Exodus and become a new Pharaoh. A decentralised form of defence acts as a check on the king's power and keeps him reliant upon God for success in battle. Second, the king cannot 'acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away' (Deuteronomy 17:17). Although this is often taken as a prohibition against taking foreign wives in order to make foreign alliances, with the added risk of idolatry, the text in fact limits multiple marriages generally with all women, not just those with foreign women. Not only does this prevent royal sexual misadventures, it also blocks attempts to consolidate power by marrying into powerful social networks. Finally, the king cannot 'acquire for himself excessive silver and gold' (Deuteronomy 17:17), thereby restricting the king's ability to control fiscal policy. All three prohibitions limit the king's ability to engage in the typical, exclusionary power plays that were common to other monarchies in the Near East. Instead, by limiting his independence, the king is forced to rely, instead, upon Israel's true King - God Himself.

It's for this reason that the Israelite king has only one positive duty in Deuteronomy. This is to 'write for himself

in a book a copy of this law...’ and ‘read in it all the days of his life that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them’ (Deuteronomy 17:18-19). He has to spend his time, as Bernard Levinson puts it, in the company of ‘the very... scroll that delimits his powers’ (‘The reconceptualization of kingship in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history’s transformation of Torah,’ *Vetus Testamentum* 51, 2001, p. 522). Such a king really would be like a brother since the very same requirement is made of the ordinary Israelite (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:2; 10:12-13; 31:12). As Jamie A. Grant writes, ‘the king is ... set apart as an exemplar of torah-piety for all the people’ (The King as Exemplar, 2004, p. 208). The Israelite king thus serves the law as a legally-constituted and legally-constrained monarch; a model citizen and a servant of the people.

#### THE CROWN’S JEWEL

Queen Elizabeth II not only stands in the tradition of servant monarchy exemplified by Deuteronomy, she also stands in an Anglo-Saxon tradition of royal subordination to the Bible – a tradition itself impacted by biblical law. The point is easily demonstrated with reference to two opposing examples: King John (reigning 1199-1216) and King Alfred (reigning 871-899).

In King John’s case, as is well known, the events of Magna Carta were not simply a revolt against Angevin government, and its burdensome taxations, but also a battle of ideas about what monarchical government should be. The central question was whether kings ruled according to their own will, or according to law. Biblical law played a key part in this national drama because it shaped the intellectual convictions of Stephen Langton, who was Archbishop of Canterbury between 1207 and 1228 and, in that capacity, was the chief negotiator of Magna Carta between King John and the rebel barons. Langton also played a key role in the ultimate redraft of Magna Carta in 1225, this being the version that was subsequently confirmed over 50 times by later English kings. Prior to becoming Archbishop, Langton spent 30 years teaching in the Paris schools and wrote extensively on the limits of rulers. In his commentary on

King Solomon’s accession to the throne, Langton wrote: ‘See how and with what manner and words the king is to speak to his people. Listen to me, my brothers, in our shared humanity, my people, in the way government is exercised’ (cited in Phillipe Buc, *L’ambiguïté du livre: Prince, pouvoir, et peuple dans les commentaires de la Bible au Moyen Âge*, 1994, p. 329). Inspired by Deuteronomy 17:17, Langton’s position on royal taxation paralleled his views regarding monarchy; legitimate in principle, but open to abuse and therefore requiring restraint. Given the importance of royal revenues to negotiations around Magna Carta between 1215 and 1225, this was explosive. Whereas canon law, like English law, put the king ‘above the due process of his courts,’ Torah made the king subordinate (John W. Baldwin, “Due process in Magna Carta,” in Robin Griffith-Jones and Mark Hill, *Magna Carta, Religion and the Rule of Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 51). Langton expected kings to align the laws of their kingdom with biblical law; even King John was supposed to submit to Deuteronomy.

In complete contrast to King John, who despised biblical law, even whilst paying lip-service to it, King Alfred the Great gave it an unparalleled place of honour. His law-code was the first and only codification of Old English law. Alfred’s laws were the first to apply to all lands under English rule and they were based, explicitly, on the laws of Moses (specifically, a lengthy extract from the Covenant Code of Exodus). This, in fact, was one of the earliest attempts at translating the Bible into Old English: of everything Alfred could have translated from the Bible for his people, he chose biblical law. To cap it all, Alfred did not simply translate the biblical laws but creatively interpreted and applied them to his kingdom, skilfully integrating the *lex dei* (law of God) and the *lex mundane* (worldly law). In particular, Alfred tells us that he ‘gathered together’ synodal judgments ‘and commanded to write down many of those that our predecessors held, which to me seemed good; and many that did not seem good to me I set aside with my wise men’s counsel...’ (Alfred’s Laws 49.9; Todd Preston, *King Alfred’s Book of Laws*, 2012).



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 Alfred typified a style of consultative kingship that placed the king under the law. This wasn’t new: it was standard practice for Anglo-Saxon kings to issue laws on the advice of their council. What is novel is Alfred’s express submission of the monarchy to biblical law. Alfred stands in the line of Moses. Alfred is part of the reason why Langton could write, in his first letter to the English people, as Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1207, that ‘whatever service is rendered to the temporal king to the prejudice of the eternal king is undoubtedly an act of treachery’ (F. M. Powicke, Stephen Langton, 1965, p. 97). Alfred’s law-code arguably anticipated Magna Carta itself with its biblical and Old English motifs of Exodus-style freedom. The point is that our modern ideas about government – understood as the servant of public, or common, good, and subject to the Rule of Law – have been hard-won and owe much, historically, to the reception of biblical law.

#### THE SERVANT QUEEN AND HER SERVANT KING

From her Coronation onwards, Queen Elizabeth II has formally displayed her own, willing subordination to the Scriptures and regularly points to Jesus Christ as her inspiration. In doing so, she is part of a noble royal tradition in which the Deuteronomic model of the servant king is affirmed and given new energy in the gospel. The Gospels demonstrate a profound continuity

with the Deuteronomic model of the servant king and the many critiques of authoritarianism made within the Hebrew Bible. According to this, the New Testament’s proclamation of Jesus as Lord not only intensifies the relativisation of all earthly political authorities but also intensifies humbled government. All authorities are meant to be humble servants of the Lord and of the people they govern. Rulers are accountable to God but also to other human beings. It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this ‘de-divinisation’ of temporal power, which radically underlies developing understandings of constitutional order as they developed within Christian Europe.

On 2 June 1953, Elizabeth swore an oath on the Bible. In doing so, and in keeping her promise, we have all been blessed. By modelling herself on her Servant King, our servant Queen has shown us of the benefits not only of a Deuteronomic style of monarchy but also of that particular style of English monarchy that, at its best, emphasises accountability to God, and to the people, as well as conciliar government. All of these virtues will be tested in the road ahead. As we celebrate her, let’s also remember the source of her inspirations and lay hold of them with renewed vigour, for we have the advantage of one thing she never had: her own example.

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