

# **The Politics of Serving “Other Gods”**

**Rob Barrett**

**Postgraduate Workshop  
Department of Theology and Religion  
University of Durham**

**19 Jan 2007**

## ABSTRACT

*The book of Deuteronomy expresses a deep concern for Israel turning from YHWH to "other gods." The canonically subsequent monarchical histories (Samuel/Kings and Chronicles) largely evaluate kings based on their attitude toward other gods, with particular focus on the associated cultic practices (e.g. high places and altars). I suggest in this paper that serving other gods also has political implications for the kings of Israel and Judah. Such a result is not surprising since ancient Near Eastern kings were understood to function as the vital connection between the divine and human realms. Whether ruling as a god or as a designate of the gods, the king's politics reflected the divine will. Although not stated explicitly in the canonical texts, I find a strong correlation between serving other gods and particular uses of political power. Specifically, the kings of Judah and Israel who worship other gods tend to concentrate domestic power and manipulate international power in order to assure their own security and prosperity. In contrast, the service of YHWH is marked by egalitarian politics that seemingly place the nation at risk in a dangerous world, but secure it under YHWH's protection and blessing. I present the case for this religio-political connection based on the biblical text and also note the similar conclusions from the sociological studies of Mendenhall and Gottwald. I would like to present a 20-25 min paper and leave the remaining 15-20 min for discussion of this work-in-progress. Since I am suggesting an unusual conclusion from the biblical text, I am hoping to generate a discussion that can sharpen or even challenge my results.*

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The phrase "other gods" (אלהים אחרים) plays a critical role in the book of Deuteronomy. Every time YHWH's anger is mentioned in Deuteronomy, it is provoked by Israel turning from YHWH to other gods. The result for Israel is destruction. Here is a typical example: "The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the people who are all around you, because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth" (6:13-15). Without dwelling on the compositional history

<sup>1</sup> Total word count: 3435; target: 25 min x 120 wpm = 3000 words.

behind the canonical text, it is important to notice that Deuteronomy's concern over other gods is reflected in both the Joshua-Kings history and Chronicles.

The prominence of the concern over serving other gods raises a problem for modern interpreters. Although modernity can somewhat handle the idea monotheism, polytheistic ideas are nearly impenetrable for most of us. [Parenthetically, I am not interested here in whether the authors of these texts believed in the existence of these other gods]. Pantheons and pagan myths are largely incomprehensible for us. But how can progress be made in understanding these texts? I suggest that the gods one worships are connected to one's politics. And politics, unlike polytheism, is something modern people understand.

I note that the separation of religion and politics—inner and outer life, gods and states—is a recent innovation. The pre-modern world did not divide human life into these two separate spheres. So I pose this question: does the canonical text indicate a particular attitude towards political power that correlates with whether a nation worships YHWH or other gods? The answer is not obvious, but the mere fact that the royal histories describe both the kings' religious practices (e.g. building or tearing down high places) and political activities (e.g. foreign alliances and wars) suggests that there may be grounds for answering the question. So can we take steps toward understanding, at least partially, the fused religious and political concerns of the ancient authors? My thesis is simple: Israel worshipping other gods besides YHWH is linked to Israel's kings abusing power by concentrating it domestically and manipulating it internationally.

#### DOES DEMANDING A KING IMPLY SERVING "OTHER GODS"?

I begin with YHWH's word to Samuel when the elders of Israel demanded a king: "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving *other gods*, so also they are doing to you" (1Sam.8:7). Where did the "other gods" come from? It makes sense that YHWH complains of being rejected, but there is no reference here to Israel serving other deities. Why is a request for a king "like other nations" interpreted as a turning to "other gods"?

To understand the connection, we should consider the common understanding of kingship in the ancient Near East. Divine kingship was unanimously assumed by Israel's neighbors. "Through the king, the harmony between human existence and supernatural order was maintained."<sup>2</sup> Fertility of crops and people, safety from storms, protection from enemies, all prosperity, security and stability flowed from the king's connection to the divine. Either the king was a god himself, as in Egypt, or the

---

<sup>2</sup> Henri Frankfort, "Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 17.

monarch was placed into his role by the gods, as in Mesopotamia. In either case, the king held back the forces of chaos and maintained the order of creation.

Against this historical background, what is Deuteronomy's model for Israel's governance? In chapters 16-18, Israel's institutions of power are defined: judges, king, priests, and prophets.<sup>3</sup> A striking feature of this exposition of Israel's governance is the prevention of the concentration of human power. Judges and officers are distributed throughout the land (16:18). Appeals to a centralized court are only for clarification on the details of the law (17:8-9), not for control of the lower courts. The Levitical priests are spread throughout the land (18:6). Though a prophet may wield considerable power, his words are to be tested, with the highest penalty for wrongly claiming to speak for YHWH (18:20).

So what is the role of the king in Deuteronomy? In a word, Israel's king is irrelevant and seen as more dangerous than helpful. Deuteronomy considers a future occasion when Israel says, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me" (17:14). A striking contrast with Israel's neighbors is immediately apparent: Israel's monarchy results from human desire, not divine pronouncement.<sup>4</sup> As Albrecht Alt comments: "The monarchy is not presented [in Deuteronomy] as an essential in the life of the nation as Yahweh desired it. It is seen as an additional feature which was optional."<sup>5</sup>

What is Israel's king to do? Interestingly, the passage begins by saying what Israel's king is *not* to do. Accumulation of power is thrice forbidden: no multiplying of horses, wives, or money (17:16-17). Multiplying horses means escalation of military strength. Multiplying wives implies a foreign policy based on numerous marriage alliances, tying Israel to the ways of other kings...and their gods. The multiplication of money is elsewhere in Deuteronomy known to lead to self-sufficiency and forgetting YHWH (cf. 6:11-12; 8:11-17). The three prohibitions of accumulation reflect a coherent fear that apostasy naturally follows from too much power being concentrated in the king.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the themes of governance and the prohibition of worshiping other gods (16:21-17:7; 18:9-14) are interwoven. This thematic complexity has led to various attempts to unearth the text's compositional history and generate a reordering of the text to smooth its reading [cf. Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 215ff] However, when interpreting the final form of the canonical text, it is helpful to ask what function such interweaving plays. Although it may be accidental that serving other gods (אלהים אחרים) is the capital crime chosen to illustrate proper court procedure (17:2-7), it is more likely that the complex and important relationship between proper worship and proper governance warrants highlighting. The government is responsible for maintaining pure worship in the nation and, in the other direction, improper worship (16:21-17:1) is likely seen as a threat to just government.

<sup>4</sup> Parenthetically, the same theme appears in the only other reference to Israel's king in Deuteronomy. The covenant curse of exile will apply to "you, and the king whom you set over you" (Deut.28:36). At the end of the same verse, Israel and her king, who makes YHWH's people like other nations, will be sent by one of those other nations she emulates into exile where she will "serve other gods (אלהים אחרים)."

<sup>5</sup> Albrecht Alt, "The Monarchy in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (ed. Albrecht Alt; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 241.

So if the king is *not* supposed to do these things, what is he actually to do? In a surprising twist of ancient Near Eastern convention, Deuteronomy's king has only one job: "When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests.<sup>6</sup> It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life" (17:18-19). Deuteronomy is silent about typical royal functions such as administration of justice and leadership in war. These tasks are allotted to other leaders.<sup>7</sup> Israel's king's primary responsibility is to be a student of Torah. The reason for this is then clarified: "...so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel" (17:19-20).<sup>8</sup> Keeping Torah will prevent him from exalting himself, which in itself leads to forgetting YHWH (cf. 8:14), but more to the point here, would also lead him to forget that he is one of a community of siblings (cf. v.15), a servant of the people, as it were. A second negative result is that fear of YHWH will prevent him from turning from the commandment of YHWH and turning to other gods.<sup>9</sup>

While other ancient Near Eastern kings were the unchallengeable channel for the divine law that ruled the people, in Israel the law was established by YHWH at Sinai, apart from any king. The king's sole mandate was to devote himself to this same law that YHWH had given to the people. The law is not from him, nor does it empower him; it shapes and limits him just like any other citizen. I should mention at this point that some portions of the Old Testament, particularly the royal psalms, have a very high view of the king and closely associate him with YHWH. Examination of these texts is beyond my present scope.

<sup>6</sup> The compound term מִלְפָּנָי is variously rendered "in the presence of" (NRSV, NASB) or "taken from [the copy in the custody of]" (NIV, cf. RSV). In either case, the responsibility of the levitical priests over the text which the king must obey is clear (cf. Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 213).

<sup>7</sup> McBride suggests that the king might have an implicit role in the official interpretation and enforcement of the law (Dean McBride, "Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy," *Int* 41 [1987]: 241), though there is nothing in the passage to point in this direction beyond the king's commanded focus on the law. It is surprising that there is no role for the king in the exposition on warfare in ch.20. The people (עַם; vv.2, 5, 8-9), priest (כֹּהֵן; v.2), and officers (שָׂרִים; vv.5, 8, 9; שָׂר; v.9) have roles in Deuteronomy's understanding of warfare, but not the king (Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 214).

<sup>8</sup> The governing verb is "fear," which in Deuteronomy's treaty context means loyal submission and obedience. Deut.10:12 links fear of YHWH with clear treaty language: to love (אָהַב) and serve (עָבַד). On יָרָא as treaty language, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 274, 83.

<sup>9</sup> The singular and definite הַמִּצְוָה ("the commandment") may refer specifically to the first commandments and their prohibition of worshipping other gods and idols (Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text With the New JPS Translation* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996], 169) or it may mean the law generally and in its entirety (J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* [Leicester: Apollos, 2002], 296), in which worshipping other gods and idols are Deuteronomy's principal concerns. Weinfeld is persuasive that הַמִּצְוָה corresponds "to the basic stipulation of allegiance known to us from the treaties, or rather loyalty oaths, in the ancient Near East" (Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1991], 326; cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomistic*, 65-91).

"Israel is to be distinct from the other nations at the precise point of kingship."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, when the elders of Israel demand a king *like other nations*, they are seeking a theopolitical structure at odds with YHWH's Torah. Whatever other differences there may be, YHWH's king has a different sort of political power from that of the kings who serve other gods.

### "BAD" KINGS AND "OTHER GODS"

I have motivated the idea that the worship of "other gods" is linked to particular political power structures in Israel. I now turn to the reigns of particular kings to see if the canonical histories sustain such a linkage.<sup>11</sup>

#### Solomon

I begin with Solomon. After Solomon builds the temple, YHWH warns him: "If you or your sons...do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but *go and serve other gods and worship them*, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them.... This house will become a heap of ruins...." (1Kgs.9:6-8). YHWH is quite clear: the monarchy is subject to Torah and will be evaluated according to Torah criteria, the primary requirement of which is avoiding other gods.<sup>12</sup>

Solomon's reign is then described in glorious terms: piles of gold, great building projects, a standing army, sacrifices at the temple, a fleet of trading ships, and the awe of the queen of Sheba. But YHWH did not say anything about royal success being measured by such things. It is only Torah that matters.<sup>13</sup> What are we to make of Solomon? Let's look at a few episodes in his story.

The narrator declines to evaluate Solomon's royal gift to Hiram of twenty Israelite cities, but the reader must wonder about the fate of the Israelites who dwelt there. Transferring away someone else's land hardly seems in accord with Deuteronomy's prohibition that the king not exalt himself above his brothers (Deut.17:20). We're told Solomon's impressive buildings depend on forced labor (9:15).<sup>14</sup> He builds an impressive chariot and cavalry army (10:26), but this implies multiplying

<sup>10</sup> McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 295.

<sup>11</sup> While many commentators are interested in evaluating the reigns of kings in terms other than that expressed in the final form—for example, before a so-called "Deuteronomistic redaction"—my goal is to understand the characterization of the kings in the canonical text.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings: A Commentary* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 122.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Samuel's warning (1Sam.8:16).

horses.<sup>15</sup> The description of Solomon's reign is littered with gold, quantities that increase as we read: from 120 talents, to 420 and then 666.<sup>16</sup> So what of the warning against multiplying gold?

The queen of Sheba's visit is an impressive meeting between royalty, but the concerns of the common Israelites are completely eclipsed by court opulence (10:4-5). "Happy are these your servants, who continually attend you and hear your wisdom!" she exclaims (10:8), but this is more of a statement of Solomon's ability to reward his close circle than of his provision for ordinary Israelites. A complaint by "all Israel" after Solomon's death about the oppressiveness of his policies reveals that the people were not entirely benefiting from their king's luxury (1Kgs.12:1-4).

The careful reader notes the multiplying of horses and gold and is suspicious of Solomon. But does he multiply wives and break the third prohibition? The narrator answers and condemns Solomon: "King Solomon loved many foreign women.... When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God" (1Kgs.11:1-4). Although often seen as Israel's high point, it seems that Solomon's power implies sinking into the ways of other kings and their other gods. When the "other gods" make their appearance, Solomon's entire reign is revealed to be glorious by human standards but an utter failure according to Torah.

### Jeroboam

Next consider Jeroboam, the first monarch of the northern kingdom of Israel and the prototype for all future evil kings. As expected, "other gods" are central to the condemnation of Jeroboam. The prophet speaks YHWH's condemnation to him: "You have done evil ... and have gone and made for yourself other gods ... provoking me to anger, and have thrust me behind your back" (1Kgs.14:9). As in Deuteronomy, association with other gods provokes YHWH's anger.<sup>17</sup>

Jeroboam's deeds certainly include cultic acts: making two golden calves and placing them in Bethel and Dan for Israel's worship,<sup>18</sup> building the high places, forming his own priesthood, and devising his own religious festival.<sup>19</sup> However, his cultic innovations flow from shrewd politics:

<sup>15</sup> Even more suspicious is the explicit statement that Solomon procured his horses from Egypt (10:28-29; cf. Deut.17:16). The text seems to celebrate Solomon's role as horse trader, acting as middleman between Egypt and the kings of the Hittites and Aram (10:29), but such a position clearly makes him dependent upon Egypt—a form of economic enslavement.

<sup>16</sup> As Provan notes, "Solomon is a king who accumulates gold in extraordinarily large amounts—amounts that increase as we read (120 talents in 9:14; 420 in 9:28; 666 in 10:14)" (Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995], 85). Note that 10:10 is an exception.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Deut.4:25; 9:18; 31:29; 32:16, 21. Most of these passages refer to other gods or idols, but not necessarily explicitly to אלהים אחרים.

<sup>18</sup> Jeroboam's calves are often understood to be analogous to the cherubim in Judah: forming the pedestal for the unrepresentable YHWH, rather than representations of YHWH or other gods (William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957], 298-301 [cited by John Bright, *A History of Israel* [4th ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000], 238]; William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* [London: Athlone, 1968], 171-2).

<sup>19</sup> 1Kgs.12:28-33; 13:33.

“Jeroboam said to himself, ‘Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to...Judah” (1Kgs.12:26-27). Jeroboam fashions his calves and persuades his people to worship in the northern kingdom’s own places in order to secure his political power. Jeroboam’s religion and politics are coordinated. He manipulates the power of religion to secure himself and his new state. YHWH gives Jeroboam rule as a gift (14:7-8) but Jeroboam’s concern for security leads him to thrust YHWH behind his back (14:9). Jeroboam seeks the power of other gods and YHWH determines to destroy his kingdom.

### Ahaz

Finally, consider Ahaz. He is described as making his son to pass through the fire and offering sacrifices “on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree” (vv.3-4). So Ahaz sins by cult, but what about his politics? When threatened by his neighbors, Ahaz (vv.5-6) swears loyalty to Assyria in order to convince the Assyrian king to rescue him. To secure this favor, Ahaz takes silver and gold from both YHWH’s house and his own to send a present to him (v.8). Ahaz transfers YHWH’s valuables to his new overlords: the imperial gods and king of Assyria.<sup>20</sup>

When Ahaz goes to meet the Assyrian king in Damascus to express his gratitude, he is so impressed by the Syrian altar he finds there that he orders a copy to be built and placed in YHWH’s temple (vv.10-16). Absorbing foreign gods into Judah’s pantheon makes sense in the pagan world: the defeated gods of Syria are now properly submissive to Ashur and thus provide their aid to all of the nations of the Assyrian empire, which now includes Judah. He still worships YHWH, but as a subordinate god. Ahaz’s loyalty is with Assyria. In the face of danger, Ahaz has found apparent security for himself and the nation through the worship of other gods, who grant him a safe place within the power structures of the day.<sup>21</sup>

Jacques Ellul comments that “Ahaz’s objective is the same as that of Jeroboam but with a slant to foreign policy rather than domestic policy as in the case of the king of Israel. There is the same

<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann notes the significance of this action: Ahaz “had exchanged the sovereignty of Yahweh for the sovereignty of Assyria. ... It followed that [Ahaz] must take the valuables dedicated to Yahweh...and rededicate them to the new overlord, Tiglath-pileser and his imperial gods.” (Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 470). Ahaz gives his gift to the Assyrian king in order to bring Judah into his family of nations, which endorses Ashur as the Great God and Tiglath-pileser as the Great King. I do not claim that Ahaz adopts Assyrian cultic practice, but rather that the political act of subordination and tribute communicates a theological position of endorsing Assyrian religio-political dominance, at least in the eyes of the Assyrians, if not in Ahaz’s own understanding. On the question of Assyrian imposing cultic practice on its vassals, see John W. McKay, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians: 732-609 BC* (London: SCM, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> As noted above, the phrase אלהים אחרים is not used in reference to Ahaz in Kings but appears in 2Chr.28:25.

exploiting of a god who is useful to the state, who can be an instrument of policy."<sup>22</sup> Like Jeroboam, Ahaz successfully and ironically saves YHWH's nation from destruction by shifting the national loyalty away from YHWH. The political fallout from submitting to Assyria will come later. Judah is enmeshed in political alliances from which she will never escape. The false promise of security through playing the power games of the ancient Near East was too much for Israel's and Judah's kings to resist.

The Chronicler summarizes Ahaz's reign like this: "He sacrificed to the gods of Damascus, which had defeated him, and said, 'Because the gods of the kings of Aram helped them, I will sacrifice to them so that they may help me.' But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel" (2Chr.28:23).<sup>23</sup>

### "GOOD" KINGS AND "OTHER GODS": HEZEKIAH

The canonical histories reveal a connection between serving other gods and manipulation of political power, both in domestic and international affairs. But to establish the link, I also need to show that the kings who *refuse* to worship other gods turn away from such power plays. It is important to bear in mind that all of these kings, even the best, are portrayed with accompanying failures, which adds some complexity to the analysis. I only have time to discuss one of the best kings here.

Hezekiah is evaluated in glowing terms: "He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses" (vv.5-6).

So how do Hezekiah's politics reflect loyalty to YHWH? The narrative answers this question with Hezekiah's first political act: "He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him" (v.7). Although often interpreted as an arrogant assertion of independence from the prevailing imperial power, the narrator places this within the context of obedience to YHWH's law. To "not serve" Assyria shows loyalty to YHWH, while necessarily provoking the anger of Assyria, who does not appreciate disloyalty.<sup>24</sup>

Assyria responds by invading Judah and capturing all of her fortified cities (2Kgs.18:13). Faced with this apparent failure on the part of YHWH, Hezekiah blinks and surrenders to Assyria, though he neither repents of his rebellion nor swears loyalty, but "merely" promises tribute, which is

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 128.

<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that this passage (at least on the surface) attributes real power to the gods of Damascus, even in the words of the narrator and not just in Ahaz's speech. The grammar is clear that the antecedent of "which had defeated him" is "gods" and not "Damascus." The final statement, "they were the ruin of him," is less transparent, for the worship of אלהים אחרים can lead to YHWH's destructive anger without necessitating any power in these other gods.

<sup>24</sup> Historians believe Hezekiah's rebellion was also motivated by Assyrian weakness (Bright, *History*, 280-1).

accepted. Hezekiah is forced to sack the temple in order to pay (vv.15-16). This is not Hezekiah's finest hour, but neither is it the end of the story.

Although accepting Hezekiah's tribute, Sennacherib lays siege to Jerusalem. His envoy calls out to the people of Jerusalem, "Do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, the LORD will deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered its land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?" (vv.32-33). The test for Hezekiah consists of holding out against Assyria's obvious military might—the might of "other gods"—and trusting in the invisible might of YHWH. In the end, Hezekiah stands firm in his loyalty to YHWH (2Kgs.19:1-34) and YHWH does not disappoint, but compels Assyria to lift the siege (2Kgs.19:35-36). Parenthetically, Sennacherib's life ends ironically: "As he was worshipping in the house of his god Nisroch,<sup>25</sup> his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword" (v.37). The most powerful man in the world, while worshipping "other gods," is overpowered by his own sons and killed.<sup>26</sup>

Hezekiah models trust in YHWH even under extreme pressure. The narrative denies any multiplication of domestic power or manipulation of international power for himself or his kingdom. Hezekiah shuns the other gods and their politics.

#### SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

By way of conclusion, I want to mention the work of sociologists in the study of gods and political power. Karl Jaspers coined the term "axial age" to refer to a revolutionary and global change in thought during the first millennium B.C. As Robert Bellah describes it, one aspect of this axial change in the world was the breaking apart of gods and kings: "It is with the early state...that we see high gods and kings emerge together. ... The relation between high god and high king was everywhere close in archaic states, sometimes amounting to identity. ... In all these archaic societies [Egypt, China, Japan] the king was high priest, the chief and indispensable mediator and intercessor between humans and the gods. There was no church and no state as separate entities; there was only a single religiopolitical community."<sup>27</sup> "With the axial age ... [the crack between god and king] widens into a chasm. Kings do not disappear — they never do — but they are no longer the primary channel for relating the human

<sup>25</sup> The identity of this god is uncertain.

<sup>26</sup> Two brief narratives complete Hezekiah's story. In the first (2Kgs.20:1-11), Hezekiah falls ill and pleads to YHWH for his life, claiming a life of faithfulness (vv.1-3). YHWH agrees, extends Hezekiah's life, and promises to deliver Hezekiah and Jerusalem from the power of Assyria (v.6). YHWH's power acts on behalf of Hezekiah even when he is so weak as to be at death's door. In the second (2Kgs.20:12-19), Hezekiah is shown in a negative light. When envoys from Babylon come to the sick Hezekiah with letters and a gift (v.12)—probably an attempt to form an alliance with him against Assyria—Hezekiah welcomes them and shows him his wealth and military might (v.13). Such a display would be designed to increase his bargaining power with Babylon. This gesture of manipulating international power is quickly condemned by Isaiah (vv.14-18), who foretells the destruction Judah will suffer under the power of Babylon.

<sup>27</sup> Robert N. Bellah, "God and King," in *The Robert Bellah Reader* (ed. Robert N. Bellah; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 359.

and the divine; all existing institutions, including political ones, stand under divine judgment.”<sup>28</sup> Israel was the focal point of this axial change in the Levant.

Indeed, sociological studies of the Old Testament by Max Weber, Norman Gottwald, and George Mendenhall, seek to reconstruct Israel’s history and conclude that it was exactly Israel’s commitment to an egalitarian power structure and YHWH’s interaction with the entire nation through Torah rather than through a king that led to Israel’s countercultural society. They see the covenant between the people of Israel and YHWH as the nation’s concrete point of origin. While my study is canonical and theological rather than a historical reconstruction, it seems significant that others recognize the important contrast between Israel’s relationship with YHWH and other nations with their gods.

Finally, as revealed by the kings’ stories I have reviewed here, it is risky to trust YHWH rather than political power. It is undoubtedly effective to concentrate power in a centralized government that controls vast armies and money, and makes advantageous alliances with foreign powers. But Israel’s Torah prohibits such use of power, which would naturally result in a weak nation. This reality transforms one’s understanding of such Old Testament passages as the covenant blessings and curses of Deuteronomy. There, YHWH does not simply use carrots and sticks to get Israel’s obedience. Rather, he reassuringly promises to bless Israel with prosperity and security even in political weakness. And if his people seek prosperity and security through the gods of political power, YHWH guarantees to use his power to destroy Israel.

---

<sup>28</sup> Bellah, “God,” 362.