

The State in the Bible

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Abstract:

This article examines four bible texts: Israel's authority to appoint a king granted in Deuteronomy 17.14-20; Jotham's prophecy in Judges 9.8-15; the demand for Saul to be King, evaluated in 1 Samuel 8.11-18; and Paul's teaching in Romans 13.1-7. I suggest that the bible permits, but does not prescribe, the formation of states. The proper basis for state legitimacy is the informed consent of subjects. There is no biblical mandate for anarchism. The historic Anabaptist aspiration is not for the abolition of the state but rather for the means that enable a peaceful society with maximum voluntary self-government.

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The State in the Bible

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In issue 1.2 of this journal, the editor, Lloyd Pietersen, gave space to my claim that the sixteenth-century Anabaptist vision for separation of church and state was fulfilled in London in 1646.¹ In that year a group of churches ‘commonly though falsely called Anabaptist’ declared that it was permissible for a Christian to be a magistrate. After a long century of persecution, Hubmaier’s suggestion that Anabaptists could participate in serving a legitimate state was eventually accepted, in the conditions of the civil war between Parliament and the king, when it became possible to contemplate a new kind of state, with freedom in matters of religion.

In the following issue of the journal, Lloyd Pietersen advanced the case for an ‘anarchist’ reading of the Scriptures, in particular of Romans 13:1–7.² Paul seems to say that the state is established by God and uses violence (‘the sword’) for good. Lloyd suggests that Paul is using irony here to expose the false claim of Emperor Nero that he rules without the terror of the sword. Paul and Jesus are anarchists, favouring a system of rule based on love and non-violence. Anarchism ‘informed by the sixteenth century Anabaptists’ insistence’ on church-state separation leads to a political philosophy which ‘rejects the legitimacy of ... the state’ in favour of a society based on (quoting Peter Marshall) ‘voluntary associations of free and equal individuals’.

This view may be seen as a corrective to mine (though Lloyd does not offer it as such) and more in line with mainstream twentieth-century Anabaptist thinking associated with John Howard Yoder. However, we may briefly note here that the prevailing view among sixteenth-century Anabaptists, passed down from Schleithem, was not that the state is illegitimate, nor that Christians should strive for its abolition: rather, Anabaptists saw the state as necessary to enforce order among unbelievers. Christians (baptised believers) are to submit to it but seek to create their own alternative order within voluntary and uncoerced communities, and are not to take an active role in state business, since this means exercising physical coercion which a Christian may not do.

There follows in this article a view of what the Bible teaches about the state, based mainly on three texts: God’s authorisation of a king in Deuteronomy 17:14–20; the story of Gideon, Jotham and Abimelech in Judges 8 – 9; and Paul’s letter to the Romans mentioned previously. I will also visit Samuel’s condemnation of the appointment of King Saul in 1 Samuel 8:11–18. After considering points of agreement and difference with Lloyd, I will offer a view of the modern state. Is mine an ‘Anabaptist’ position? I offer it as such, but readers must decide for themselves!

What is the State?

We need first to be clear about what we mean by the ‘state’. By this, I refer to a social institution which successfully claims a sustainable monopoly in the use of physical force across a defined territory. It is able to suppress force, coming from both internal and external sources, which it has not authorised. Its territory is defined and not temporary: it has borders. Its authority lasts over time. It therefore requires structures that reproduce themselves under

the direction of a range of specialist decision-makers. In looking for biblical commentary on 'the state' we are looking for instances of such an institution.

Deuteronomy 17:14–20

The fifth book of the Old Testament offers a record of Moses' legacy to the Hebrew tribes. He has led them out of slavery at the hands of the state in Egypt, through the desert and to the edge of the promised lands lying across the river Jordan. At a recorded time and date, forty years into their migration, Moses 'spoke to the children of Israel according to all that the LORD had given him as commandments to them' (Deut. 1:3³). In chapter 17, Israel learns that the time will come to choose a king, 'like all the nations' (17:14) around them. But, surprisingly, this king will rule without great military power ('great numbers of horses', 17:16, NIV) personal wealth ('silver and gold') and multiple wives. Here are the usual ways by which kings exercise internal control – armies to suppress, money to bribe, and marriages to make dependent families in the various parts of their kingdom. How, we may ask, can a king rule without these resources?

Verses 18 and 19 offer two answers to this question – one of principle, another of practice. In principle, and in the answer on the face of the text, the king rules with the authority of God – he is God's choice. But this cannot conclude the examination. After all, most political power is justified by the 'mandate of heaven' whereby, in the words of the anthropologist Georges Balandier, 'statesmen are kinsmen of the gods.'⁴ How are people to know who has this mandate? The text says that the king will be a submissive student of God's law, a law he can both read and write, so 'his heart is not lifted above his brethren'. This king accepts the same rules as the rest of society, and does not lift himself above them. This will be one measure of God's endorsement, but it is useful only if the rest of society knows these rules and is able to judge the king's service against this measure. In terms of practical politics, without the resources of overwhelming force, bribery and polygamy, the king can rule only with the *consent* of the population. This consent is based on their assessment that the king has God's mandate to rule, which can be tested by his submission to the written law of God: so this is *informed* consent.

But why, anyway, would they need a king? Israel's sophisticated existing system of social authority is described in Deuteronomy 1:13–16. Tribal chiefs' head structures with leadership over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, supported by tribal officers. Judges are appointed to settle disputes. This structure served Israel well in migrating across the desert, and will continue to do so in the promised land.

The text gives two clues about what a king would add. First, the people would decide to appoint a king when they 'possess ... and dwell in' the territory God has given them. A king (or queen) is a ruler of *somewhere* – monarchy is permanent rule over *territory*. Second, having a king will mean they have a ruler 'like all the nations ... around'. Clearly this king will not be 'like' other kings in many significant ways, if ruling in submission to God's law, without recourse to force, money or multiple marriages. But Israel will give itself a system of territorial rule that mirrors that of its neighbours.

With kingship then comes a system of rule – the system we call the 'state'. A state is a particular kind of social institution, with control over defined territory. It does not exist alone, but exists in relation to other states – it is part of a system of states with formal arrangements for relations between states. A state claims allegiance of all who dwell within its claimed

territory, and the right to use force to compel submission. When it gave itself a king, Israel would be forming a state – something it did not have (or need) before.

Why monarchy? A state of course may be a republic, a democracy or another system without a royal family. Monarchy however provides a simple means for a state to reproduce itself by nurturing and reproducing the specialism of state management, through the court and the royal family. In this sense a monarch is a sufficient, though not a necessary, condition for the presence of a state. In general, where we see ‘king’ in the Scriptures, I would suggest we find a state. The great exception is of course ‘King’ Jesus, whose kingdom is not of (or ‘from’) this world (John 18:36) and so is not a state: states are, very much, of this world!

The coming of a state, we should note here, is not the same thing as the coming of ‘government’ or ‘governance’. Families, tribes and other ways for societies to organise themselves all have ‘governance’ – authoritative systems for making decisions, with rules and procedures for carrying these out and enforcing them. A state is a social institution with an exclusive claim over territory. It has a government which oversees the conduct of the business of the state. It should not and need not abolish the forms of governance which social groups within that territory operate for themselves, including the conduct of family life. In our time this extends to the conduct of unions, economic units, associations, churches and so on. The state does not abolish judges, whose independence is protected under the doctrine of the ‘rule of law’. If the state does abolish, or incorporate, these various forms of social provision, then its project becomes ‘totalitarian’ – its idea being that the state must represent the ‘totality’ of society.

Judges 8 – 9

In Judges 8:22, Israel puts a request to Gideon. He should rule over them; and his son and grandson should also rule as successors. So they are asking him to become king – not just a ruler, but the founder of a ruling household where authority will pass to the next in line among the male members of the family. Gideon is the first person to be invited to become king of Israel.

By this point, Gideon has used military power to conquer a defined territory over which he exercises control. In the border towns of Succoth and Penuel, he demands support for his troops and, when this is denied, he returns to destroy the opposition and demolish the tower that dominates a strategic route into his territory (8:5–9). Elsewhere he uses charm and praise to assuage the wounded pride of those whose military support he has decided he does not need (8:2). By a mix of force and politics, therefore, he has built the basis for a state to exist – he has the ability to command the loyalty of the tribes who occupy the land, to project force across the territory and control its borders, and to enforce submission when necessary. By asking him to become king, Israel is asking him to consolidate the state that he has started to build.

When a delegation offers him the throne, Gideon refuses on the grounds that God should rule. But he successfully requests gold to make an ephod to be kept in his home city. An ephod is a garment, usually elaborately designed, used by priests, and others in suitable authority, when coming before God. In other references to ephods in the Old Testament there is no indicated disapproval of such dress. But in Judges 8:27 we learn that Israel ‘played the harlot’ with it and it ‘became a snare’ to Gideon and his family. The implication is that it became an idol. It may be that it was treated as an oracle, for Gideon to exercise rule while

being, apparently, a channel for the direct rule of God. However this worked, clearly Gideon claimed to be setting up a theocracy, when what he actually brought about was idolatry.

During his life there was peace – the new state was successful. But then it all broke down. It was assumed that Gideon's sons would take over, but Gideon left no arrangements for an orderly succession. By not appointing a prince to take his place on death, he failed to secure the continuity of the state. His son by a concubine, Abimelech ('son of a king'), goes to his maternal uncles in Shechem and draws them into a plot to make him king. He presents them with two arguments to use in the local community (9:2). One is political – if no action is taken, then all seventy sons of Gideon will rule. The other is self-interest – if one person is to rule, why not make that person one of their own flesh and blood? Temple money is allocated to pay mercenaries. The other princes, barring one, are rounded up and murdered in one mass execution. Abimelech rules. The sole survivor, Jotham, leaves a fable, found in Judges 9:8–15.

The trees ask the olive, the fig and vine to become king. They refuse, because they serve the community better with their fruit. The bramble agrees, warning that he will offer shelter provided they act in truth – but otherwise, he will catch fire and burn them all up, along with the finest products of civilisation ('the cedars of Lebanon').

Jotham then applies the story to the current position. He asks if the new dominant party has acted in truth towards Gideon and his house, warning that if they have not, they will be burnt up. Clearly Gideon's supposed refusal of the throne is qualified by the facts that he continued to rule, albeit via the harlotry of the ephod, and that his sons are expected to succeed him. There is continuity between Gideon and Abimelech – if the son is a bramble, so is the father. Jotham is not talking about a choice between father and son, between good and bad trees, but about whether the people are looking after their bramble 'in truth'.

Commentaries mostly suggest that the bramble is useless while the productive trees are useful.⁵ But actually the bramble, the thornbush, is not a useless tree. It is grown to provide a boundary hedge surrounding land which can then be protected. The line of bramble, projecting painful force, will keep out intruding beasts and thieves. It will keep domestic animals within its enclosure. The boundary hedge of thorn does not replace the productive trees: it protects them. But in hot, dry conditions the thornbush can catch fire from the sun's warming. Its burning can destroy all it encloses. People who grow thornbush lines must keep them trimmed and watered – they must look after their bramble. Otherwise it may destroy not just itself but also the good things it encloses.

The thornbush, I suggest, represents the state. It is a tree specialising in the task of compulsion, protection and border control – among the trees, it has a monopoly of force. It should be maintained 'in truth' – with a correct understanding of its function and handling. Otherwise it will destroy all it is supposed to protect. People can live without the thorn, but it is useful to protect the other trees, enabling them to flourish and focus on their tasks.

Jotham notes that the Shechemites have carried out a massacre of the princes, and this does them no credit. But this is not the main reason for doubting Abimelech's prospects for success (9:16–19). The real problem is whether the Shechemite clan has really understood what they have done in making him king – have they understood what the state actually is? As it turns out, they have not. They just see it as a way to enrich themselves by creating means to rob the rest of society. Abimelech sees that things cannot be this way, and attempts

to bring his gangs under control. He dies in the process (9:53–4). Israel becomes a ‘failed state’.

Who is responsible? The blame does not lie solely with Shechem. Gideon had the honour and glory of rule, behind his ephod, but did not want the responsibility of building a sustainable state. Theocracy was his excuse for not respecting the ‘truth’ of the state. Abimelech uses political arguments that are not without merit, but takes a short cut to power by arming thugs using misappropriated funds. His uncles, facilitating this, are led by a desire to see one of their own in power, rather than by the continuation of the state.

The founding editor of the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison, knew Jotham’s fable, and wrote of it in 1711: ‘Fables were the first pieces of Wit that made their appearance in the World, and have been still highly valued, not only in times of the greatest Simplicity, but among the most polite Ages of Mankind. Jotham’s Fable of the Trees is the oldest that is extant, and as beautiful as any which have been made since that time.’⁶

In our own time we see the price of failing to cultivate thorns ‘in truth’. In Iraq and Libya, destroying bramble did not, as external powers apparently supposed, result in the flourishing of fruit trees, but rather in fire that engulfed those enclosed and singed cities around the world. Some societies benefit from thorns so neatly manicured and well-watered that their combustibility gets forgotten, so it is important to make their keepers aware of the dangers of a return to the wild. Those who live in the ‘polite ages’ may so fail to see their thorny nature that they confuse brambles with fruit trees and treat them as a source of wine, oil and figs. These good things become possible not *despite* the thorn, but *with the aid* of its carefully cultivated protection.

1 Samuel 8 – 11: King Saul

The people of Israel ask Samuel, their judge, to appoint a king. God tells Samuel to give them what they want (1 Sam. 8:9), explaining that the people are not rejecting Samuel (and order based on obedience to the law) but are rejecting God himself. Samuel’s job is to explain what they must expect of a king. Is this, as Lloyd (quoting Brueggeman) suggests, a harsh and extensive criticism of monarchy? If so, does it contradict the permission given in Deuteronomy 17?

There are significant ways in which Saul deviates from the model of kingship authorised by God. After being anointed king, he does not announce the fact even to his own family (10:16) – he is not transparent and so cannot be held accountable for his submission to the law. Instead, he becomes a prophet and indeed, to the surprise of onlookers, the leader of the prophets (10:10–12). As a prophet, he asserts a claim to have a direct word from God. When he takes control of the office of monarch, he rips up an ox and sends the pieces around the territory, announcing that this symbolises the violence he can bring on his subjects if he so chooses. He rules by terror (11:7). His rule is that of the ‘strong man’ type – his threat of violence against his own people assures them of his capacity to visit similar violence on their enemies, thus promising safety. This is what the people have sought – not open and transparent rule under law legitimised by consent, but a violent and secretive ruler who (as a prophet) can channel the mind of God and whose rule is legitimised by the capacity for ruthless physical force. They wanted someone to lead armies and fight their battles (8:20).

Romans 13:1–7

A millennium after the age of Jotham and Saul, Paul writes to Christians in Rome, where the local church sits in the capital of a great international state system. In this system, the benefits of civilisation are accompanied by phenomenal state violence, and the new Jesus movement is acutely aware of the injustice with which that violence was applied. The church worships Jesus Christ, whose earthly life ended in public execution on a state charge of political rebellion after authorities were forced to rule on accusations made by the religious authorities. The Apostle James (brother of John) died in a wave of political persecution, described in Acts 12. Christian leaders disobeyed rulers' instructions not to preach about the life, death and resurrection of their Lord – they would obey God rather than people (Acts 5:29).

So how could Paul possibly say that only wrongdoers could suffer at the hands of the state, and that doing the right thing would bring approval from the pagan, violent regime in charge of the government of Rome? What could he mean?

It is essential to consider these words of Paul in their context. They come in the middle of a passage challenging believers to be 'a living sacrifice ... which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Rom. 12:1–2).

Paul then goes on, in chapters 12 to 14, to expand on the practical ways in which this renewed mind finds expression. At the end of chapter 12 Paul quotes from the Old Testament book of Proverbs:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
If he is thirsty, give him a drink;
For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. (Rom. 12:20, quoting Prov. 25:21–2)

Elsewhere Paul urges Christians to: 'let this mind be in you which also was in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men' (Phil. 2:5–7). Clearly Christ was not nothing. But (in the translation of verse 7 in the New International Version) he 'made himself nothing' in order to fulfil his God-given purpose.

Christians, Paul says, are 'not [to] be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Rom. 12:21). From this basis Paul turns to the question of dealing with the state. The opening verses of Romans 13 are to be read in this context. He is talking about how Christians are to 'make themselves nothing' in framing their relations with the ruling authorities – about the 'mindset', the assumptions they carry in their heads when dealing with them. It is about the role the Roman church is to play in handling relations with a state compelling obedience through awesome levels of force.

Most people would think it smart not to resist. There is, anyway, Paul says, no mandate for the emergent Christian communities to resist the state. It is a lawful institution, which does not bear the sword in vain (it is liable to be used).

Paul calls for more than non-resistance. He asks for willing, positive and voluntary submission. This does not necessarily mean obedience. Christians may *submit* to the state's

punishment even if they do not *obey* an instruction if such obedience is to deny their faith. Furthermore, the church was itself to be a voluntary, self-regulating association – setting its own conditions of membership, choosing its own leaders and excluding those found to have rejected the rules (1 Cor. 5).

The picture emerges of Christians as an *uncompelled* people. They are in the church because they choose to be. There is no *point* in the state trying to compel them. In most matters, Christians do not need to be compelled because they submit as a matter of choice. In a few matters, to do with speaking of Christ, they *cannot* be compelled. Force, in relation to Christians in society, becomes irrelevant. Is this what Paul had in mind by ‘overcoming evil with good’?

Lloyd’s suggestion that Paul’s comment on the sword is meant ironically, in reference to Nero’s claim to non-violent rule, is intriguing and ingenious but I do not think it is necessary to reach broadly the same conclusion – that these verses from Romans should not be read as an item of political philosophy or social science. They are about the attitude of mind that a winsome gospel people will display in their situation.

Conclusions

People can and do live without the state. It is not intrinsic to the human condition. It is not a ‘creation ordinance’. It is neither the sole nor a superior means of human governance. Anarchism, if this means a project to form society in a way that it can live without the state, is legitimate and possibly admirable.

But there is not, in my view, a biblical basis to say that the state is *not* legitimate or that Christians *should* therefore be anarchists. The Bible permits and authorises the establishment of states. In the New Testament, we do not see believing soldiers, tax collectors or court officials being instructed to cease their service to the state. They are to carry out their duties honestly and without corruption.

There is no mandate for Christians to establish a theocratic state. Theocracy is idolatry. The state does not convey a privileged word of God. There is no authority for a Christian state if this means a state that enforces biblical law or is legitimised by God’s specific approval.

The proper basis for state legitimacy is the informed consent of the population in a framework of the rule of law. This is implied in Deuteronomy. It was adopted by Roger Williams as the basis for the Rhode Island democracy, and then by the authors of the 1646 declaration of the London churches referred to at the opening of this article.

There is no mandate for Christians to refuse to submit to the state or to seek to change it by force. Such submission may extend to accepting the consequence of disobedience when compelled to do so. By modelling submission, Christians render the state’s use of force superfluous.

If the Anabaptist vision for society is one where the church is (humanly speaking) a voluntary assembly of believers, separate from the state; where the state claims no authority in matters of religion; where disputes between people and peoples are expected to be resolved peacefully; and where the engine of communal endeavour and cohesion is a rich network of

voluntary collaboration between free and equal citizens, then to the extent such a vision is within our reach, we are indebted to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Would the abolition of the democratic state bring that to a fuller completion? In my view, it would not. Rather, the delegitimation of the state is the project of the ‘strong man’ type of political leadership, though it may not always be intended as such.

The state has a monopoly of force, but that does not mean that the state is defined by the exercise of force. Rather a monopoly of force denies its use to social actors outside the authority of the state: it is then not the use, but the absence, of force that marks the success of the state. A rich network of voluntary collaboration among peaceful free citizens does not come about by the abolition or diminution of the state, as some imagine. It requires the constant application of skill and information, supported and regulated by a particular type of state. Identifying and mobilising these resources, I suggest, is the proper task of Anabaptist politics in the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ Paul Lusk, ‘Reappraising the English Anabaptists in the Time of the Revolution: Article 50 of the 1646 Confession’, *Anabaptism Today* 1.2 (2019): pp. 15–25.

² Lloyd Pietersen, ‘Christian Anarchist Readings of the Bible with Special Reference to Romans 13’, *Anabaptism Today* 2.1 (2020): pp. 21–32.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible version quoted in this article is the New King James (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

⁴ G. Balandier, *A Political Anthropology* (trans. Sheridan Smith; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 99.

⁵ Among classic evangelical commentators, Matthew Poole (1624–79) wrote on Judg. 9:14 that the thorn is ‘a mean, and barren, and hurtful tree, fitly representing Abimelech, the son of a concubine, and a person of small use, and great cruelty’ (Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Mclean, VA: McDonald, 1985). Matthew Henry (1662–1714) found that, offered the crown, the bramble ‘accepted it with vain-glorious exultation’. Jotham ‘exposes the ridiculous ambition of Abimelech ... The bramble is a worthless plant, not to be numbered among the trees, useless and fruitless, nay, hurtful and vexatious ... its end is to be burned’ (Leslie Church, ed., *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible in One Volume*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960, pp. 255–6). The leading twentieth-century scholar F.F. Bruce (1910–90) reported that the ‘good for nothing else’ thorn ‘has the necessary leisure to become king’ while ‘trees which perform some useful service (as Gideon had done) have no time to become king. This contempt for monarchy may well reflect an early date’ (D. Guthrie and J. Motyer, eds., *New Bible Commentary*, 3rd edn, Leicester: IVP, 1970, p. 266).

⁶ *Spectator*, 29 September 1711.