

The Nature of the Old Testament Theocracy

The theocracy¹ is well defined as the “form of government under the sole, *accessible Headship* of God Himself,” who was “the Supreme Lawgiver in *civil and religious* affairs . . . and when difficult cases required it . . . the Divine Arbiter or Judge.” In sum, “the *legislative, executive, and judicial* power was vested in Him, and partially delegated to others to be exercised under a restricted form.”² Gleig emphasizes that in this arrangement, God “assumed not merely a religious, but a political, superiority, over the descendants of Abraham; He constituted Himself, in the strictest sense of the phrase, King of Israel, and the government of Israel became, in consequence, strictly and literally, a Theocracy.”³ Again, Oehler summarizes the relationship: “*In Him, as King, all political powers are united* (their earthly bearers are only Jehovah’s organs); . . . As King, He is the *Lawgiver and Judge* of His people, . . . Legal and civil regulations are but an efflux of the divine will. . . . as King, God is also the *leader of His people’s army* (comp. Num. xxiii.21); Israel forms the hosts of Jehovah, Ex. xii. 41 (כל־צבאות יהוה). He goes before them as leader in the combat, Num. x. 35; Israel’s battles are מלחמת יהוה [“the wars of Yahweh”], Num. 21:14.”⁴

That theocratic relationship, formed by Yahweh with Israel, was unique to human history.⁵ Thus, the term should not be taken as descriptive of God’s perpetual rule over all creation; as Oehler insists, “The Old Testament idea of the divine kingship expresses, not God’s general relation of power toward the world (as being its creator

¹G. F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. George E. Day (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889), 199, who credits Josephus with inventing the term “theocracy,” defines it briefly as “the government of God,” and characterizes the concept as “the form of government in the commonwealth founded by Moses.”

²George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 1:216 [emphasis original]. Cf. J. H. Kurtz, *Manual of Sacred History*, trans. Charles H. Schaeffer (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1855), 113, who states, “Theocracy is a government of the State by the immediate direction of God; Jehovah condescended to reign over Israel in the same direct manner in which an earthly king reigns over his people.”

³G. R. Gleig, *The History of the Bible*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857), 1:218.

⁴Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 200 [emphasis original]. Cf. Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* (trans. Wm. Whiston) 4.8.41, who speaks of God as the “supreme commander” in Israel’s battles, “ordaining for a lieutenant under him, one that is of the greatest courage.”

⁵The character of the theocracy in Israel is not universally recognized as distinct. For instance, Roland de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, trans. Damian McHugh (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 154, describes that governing arrangement in some detail (which he takes as the tradition preserved by the “Deuteronomist editor”), but then insists that “there is nothing in all this which really sets Israel apart from her neighbors in the Ancient East.” He then surveys various contemporary cultures (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria, Babylon) in which the kings represented themselves as serving on behalf of their gods. The issue at this point, however, becomes presuppositional, and as such goes beyond the scope of this study. It will suffice to say that to the degree that one acknowledges the supernatural character of Israel’s religion and of the Old Testament record, he has the capacity to acknowledge the absolute qualitative distinction between the actual theocracy administered by the living God of Israel and the politically motivated and deliberately manipulative claims of pagan monarchs to rule in the name of their gods.

and supporter), but the special relation of His government toward His elect people.”⁶ Indeed, there has never been another people who knew God as their King in this immediate and actual sense (Deut 4:7). Peters makes this point carefully: “The simple fact is, that since the overthrow of the Hebrew Theocracy, God has not acted in the capacity of *earthly Ruler*, with a set form of government, *for any nation or people on earth*. . . . the application of the word to any nation or people, or organization since then, *is a perversion and prostitution of its plain meaning*”⁷

Thus the remarkable enthronement scene in Exod 40:34-38; King Yahweh, majestically manifested in the Glory-cloud which represents his very real and special covenant presence with Israel, takes up his regal place above the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. In so doing he formally initiates his direct and genuine rule over a newly formed “holy nation” which he has made his “own possession” in order that this people might function as a “kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:5,6). Briggs summarizes: “As holy, the Israelites are the subjects of their holy King, and as priests they represent Him and mediate for Him with the nations.”⁸

Nor should the presence of human mediators of the rule of Yahweh be taken as an indication that the governing arrangement established at Sinai was anything less than a true theocracy. Given the majesty of King Yahweh and the essentially unapproachable character of his holiness, it was essential that he minister his daily rule of the nation through such mediators. As Peters observes, “the institution of such subordinate rulers is *an integral part of a pure Theocracy*, leaving the *Supremacy* untouched and fully acknowledged. The purest Theocracy, adapted to the government of nations, that reason can suggest, must *necessarily*, as a means of honoring the Supreme Ruler and advancing His authority, etc., have its subordinate rulers.”⁹

⁶Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 199. The term is sometimes used too broadly, as for any situation in which God rules. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 217, insists that “the word is abundantly perverted; Romanists apply it to their church; Protestants, to the Christian Church; Unbelievers, to priestly rule; writers, to Christian states, . . . thus violating the fundamental and essential idea involved in its meaning.” He then affirms, “The Theocracy is something then *very different* from the Divine Sovereignty, and must not be confounded with the same” [emphasis his].

⁷Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 1:217, [emphasis original].

⁸Charles Augustus Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 102. Cf. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 108-109, who concludes concerning the phrase “kingdom of priests” that “it was to be true of everyone in the nation,” but then posits that the nation “declined the privilege of being a national priesthood in preference to representation under Moses and Aaron (Exod. 19:16-25; 20:18-21).” This seems to vitiate the point of Exod 19:5-6. The terms of the covenant included Israel’s service as the mediator of God’s truth to the nations; this the nation did regardless of the willingness of that first generation to approach Yahweh individually and personally on the Mount.

⁹Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 1:217 [emphasis original].

As discussed in another essay, King Yahweh provided a very special ministry of the Spirit by which those human mediators might be enabled to function as his personal representatives.¹⁰ The ruling arrangement developed in the course of the theocracy, from leaders who were personally selected by Yahweh (Moses, Joshua, the Judges) to a series of kings who rose to leadership by reason of dynastic succession. But throughout the years when the Glory-cloud was resident in the tabernacle/temple, every individual in that succession of human leaders was obligated to acknowledge that he was in fact ruling only as the proxy of King Yahweh.

As to its duration, the theocracy is properly understood as formally beginning with the ratification ceremony of Exod 24:1-8; that ceremony occurred as a result of Israel's acceptance of the covenant relationship initially offered them in Exod 19:3-6 and then reoffered (after more careful explication of the relationship) in 24:1-3.¹¹ Bush says that as a result of the series of events recorded in Exod 19-24,

a peculiar constitution was adopted, familiarly known as the *Theocracy*; according to which God became *the temporal king and supreme civil magistrate of the nation*. Not that it was possible for Jehovah to sink his character of Lord and Master of the universe in his capacity as civil ruler of the Hebrews. He was still, as Creator and Judge, the God of each individual Israelite, as he is the God of each individual Christian; but he moreover sustained, both to every *individual* Israelite, and to the whole *collective body* of the Israelitish nation, the additional relation of *temporal sovereign*. In this character he solemnly proffered himself to the people at Mount Sinai, and in this character he was, with equal solemnity, accepted by their united voice.¹²

By the same token, the theocratic relationship was abandoned in 592 BC,¹³ when the Glory-cloud departed the temple in the final days before the Babylonians sacked the city of Jerusalem and carried Judah into captivity. Feinberg summarizes the solemn scene depicted in Ezekiel 9-11.

¹⁰See the essay entitled “The Old Testament ‘Theocratic Anointing’ of the Holy Spirit” under Resources at www.bookmanministries.com.

¹¹Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 199, corrects those who regard the theocracy as antedating Mt. Sinai: “The patriarchs called Him *Lord* and *Shepherd*, and it is not until He has formed a people for Himself by bringing Israel up out of Egypt that He is called, Ex. xv. 18, ‘He who is *King* for ever and ever.’ But the real beginning of His kingly rule was on that day on which He bound the tribes of Israel into a community by the promulgation of the law and the forming of a legal covenant: ‘Then He became King in Jeshurun,’ Deut. xxxiii.5” [emphasis original].

¹²George Bush, *Exodus*, 2 vols. in one, (New York: Newman & Ivison, 1852; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), 2:3 [emphasis original]. See also his discussion of the appropriateness of the tabernacle prominently placed in the center of the nation, “where the pavilions of all kings and chiefs were usually erected” (2:6). Cf. Num 23:21; Isa 41:21; 43:15; 44:6; Ps 44:4[5]; 68:24[25].

¹³Charles H. Dyer, “Ezekiel,” *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1242. Ezekiel 8-11 constitute a single vision, and the date of the vision is given in 8:1.

Ezekiel set forth the fulfillment of the warning uttered by Moses (Deut 31:17) and later by Hosea (Hosea 9:12). God had determined to forsake His sanctuary. There are several steps in His action, showing the Lord's great reluctance to abandon the abode of His own choosing. First He removed the cherub to the threshold of the temple (9:3); next, He lifted His throne over the temple's threshold (10:1); with the cherubim remaining on the right side of the house (10:3), He mounted up and sat on the throne (10:4); finally, He and the cherubim, after lingering at the door of the east gate (10:18-19), left the house (11:22-23) and did not return until the time of 43:2. . . . God was about to desert the temple, and soon there would be written over the entire structure, as well as their entire religious life, "Ichabod" ("the glory has departed").¹⁴

To be sure, Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel did not terminate at the departure of the Glory-cloud; it is not until the coming of Messiah Jesus that the covenant ratified at Mt. Sinai "is ready to disappear" (Heb 8:13; Rom 10:4; Gal 3:19, 24).¹⁵ As Andrews states, "This departure of Jehovah from His temple and land . . . marked a change in His theocratic relation to His people—a change that continues even to this day. They did not cease to be His covenant people (Lev. 26:44). His purpose in them was still unfulfilled, His promises respecting the Messiah and His kingdom were not withdrawn, and He continued to accept their worship."¹⁶ But the relationship of immediate rule by a divine King who manifested his special presence via the Glory-cloud does come to an end at that point.¹⁷

Note: This brief essay is excerpted from "The Urim and Thummim In Relation to the Old Testament Theocracy," a dissertation written by Dr. Doug Bookman in completion of the requirements for the PhD degree at Dallas Theological Seminary (2001).

For a reaction to critical discussions of the date, see Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 299-302.

¹⁴Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 61.

¹⁵It is the persuasion of this researcher that the book of Esther is intended to teach Israel how Yahweh would administer his rule in the days following the dissolution of the theocracy proper: via providential oversight rather than direct intervention. Thus, after that time God continues to send prophets according to his will, but there are no miraculous interventions on the part of the nation (compare the deliverance from Egypt with the return from Babylon) and God is not available for oracular consultation. This latter point is discussed below.

¹⁶Samuel J. Andrews, *God's Revelations of Himself to Men* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1886), 112-13. Andrews goes on to acknowledge this; he states that after the event seen in vision by Ezekiel, "[God] Himself was no more reigning at Jerusalem; the Visible Glory no more dwelt between the cherubim; the Ark was not in the Most Holy Place; the holy fire no longer burned upon the brazen altar; there was no response by Urim and Thummim."

¹⁷Cf. McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 126, who says that "the Mediatorial Kingdom of Israel was officially terminated by the departure of the Shekinah-Glory." He relates this to Jeremiah's pronouncement of doom upon the Solomonic line in Jer 22:29-30. "Since the kingdom of the Old Testament was finished, in the mind of the prophet there could be no king in Jerusalem until the kingdom would be re-established in Millennial glory."