

Liberated Leadership: Masters and "Lords" in Biblical Perspective

Ralph W. Klein

*Professor of the Old Testament, Christ Seminary — Seminex, St. Louis, Missouri and editor of **Currents** in Theology and Mission*

"Hierarchical" and "authoritarian" are two of the biggest buzz words in to-day's diction, and they are often used to criticize the contemporary family or our ecclesiastical and governmental institutions. Feminist theology has been especially and correctly vocal in its rejection of all that is hierarchical and/or authoritarian.

Such legitimate criticisms become excessive, in my judgment, when they claim to reject all use of power or when they encourage a privatistic or pietistic lifestyle. Power should not be confused with, or identified with, force or violence. The church, for example, has enormous power in moral leadership, in family education, and in seeking world peace, and it ought to cultivate this power. Citizens exert power in electing officials or passing initiative petitions. Christians — with others — have used power to bring about racial justice or to end unwise military adventures. Education, exhortation, and organization are exercises of power. While a majority vote is not always right or the will of God, it is the way most of us govern ourselves and use power to positive ends.

Aversion to power sometimes leads to purely private goals — the improvement of the individual, self development, freedom to be what we want to be. At its worst such privatism becomes narcissism, the endless trip inward. For the narcissist the good word "politics" is considered almost automatically dirty.

Much as we should welcome the

renewed criticism of hierarchy and authoritarianism, we need to put the best construction on words like power and community involvement. We need to recognize the value of the powers that be, especially since *we* often are the powers that be in the organizations and institutions of which we are a part. No to hierarchy and authoritarianism; yes to power and effective leadership. This paradox is what emerges for me in a study of the Old Testament's evaluation of those persons we call "masters" (a bad word) and "lords" (a good word). Retracing what the Bible says about "masters" and "lords" may provide models for liberated leadership today.

Masters

Why was Israel so basically opposed to masters? The root of this attitude is contained already in the first commandment and the theology it implies. Since Yahweh was the king of Israel, it would be wrong to grant sovereignty to any other power. Yahweh demanded that Israel choose between him and Baal; the political counterpart of this demand was the choice between declaring opposition to kings or submitting to them. "A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart." So wrote Luther in the Large Catechism A recent statement by an Old Testament professor in Mexico City



differs but little: "Every king demands exclusive loyalty from his subjects. In this respect Yahweh is no different. The key stipulation of Israel's constitution is exclusive loyalty to Yahweh" (George V. Pixley, *God's Kingdom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981], p. 27). Monotheism and its legal codification in the first commandment undercut the pretensions of any earthly rulers. This is especially true of the unjust or oppressive ruler, but implicitly true also of all those rulers who credit themselves with any kind of ultimate significance. This inherently revolutionary tendency in Israelite theology has been picked up by a number of re-cent scholars (George E. Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald come immediately to mind). It is worth remembering that even those parts of the canon which seem to have a more sanguine attitude toward rulers and masters (Romans 13; I Peter) must always be understood in dialectical tension with the radical word of the first commandment.

What is the job description of this divine Master? We might start an answer with a quotation from Exodus 15, perhaps the oldest poetic passage in the Scripture. In this Song of Miriam (or Moses) the poet recounts the terrifying, warlike acts by which Yahweh defeated the Egyptians and led Israel into her land. By these acts Yahweh established his kingship in the land of Israel, which is his holy abode, mountain, and sanctuary. The poem ends with an affirmation that celebrates the divine enthronement:

"Yahweh will rule as king for ever and ever" (Exod. 15:18). Whatever else divine kingship might mean or come to mean, it connoted right from the start that set of liberating and saving actions by which Israel had been set free and through which she had become a people. Israel hailed Yahweh as king because he had saved them and initiated their peoplehood.

A second picture of Yahweh's kingship comes in Psalm 97:

"Yahweh reigns; let the earth rejoice . . .

Yahweh loves those who hate evil;

he preserves the lives of his faithful ones; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked

(vv. 1, 10.)

and again in Psalm 98:

"Yahweh comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity" (v. 9).

As George Pixley remarks, "Judgment is part of a king's task, and judgment here means to subdue the wicked and to free from their dominion those who trust in Yahweh."

One of the strongest statements of this divine, royal passion for justice is in Psalm 82. The Psalm consists of a law-suit, with Yahweh as prosecutor and the "gods" as defendants. The divine prosecutor asks the gods:

"How long will you judge unjustly

and show partiality to the wicked?" (v. 2)
and then goes on to instruct them:

"Give justice to the weak and the
fatherless;

Maintain the right of the afflicted and the
destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the
wicked" (vv. 3-4).

These mandates for social action and social justice, while apparently addressed to the various gods of the world, apply equally to the various nations — Edom, Moab, Ammon, etc. — which are under these gods' protection. Clearly, from Israel's perspective, these foreign nations had judged unjustly and had showed partiality to the wicked, they had not given justice to the weak and fatherless or maintained the right of the afflicted. The supposedly divine masters of these nations are exposed by this Psalm as frauds:

"I thought you were gods, sons
of the Most High, all of you;
Nevertheless, you shall die like
men and fall like any prince"
(vv. 6-7).

True leadership, or liberated leadership, is kingship like that of Yahweh: passionate in its concern for the weak and oppressed; intolerant of social in-equity.

Because of Israel's doctrine of God, she was opposed to anyone who would claim to be king or master over her. Monarchy, at least to certain factions within Israel, seemed *essentially* evil.

Consider the fable of Jotham (Judg 9:8-15). Jotham was a son of Gideon (Jerubbaal) and lived at a time when a certain Abimelech tried to have himself installed as a king in Shechem. The fable goes somewhat as follows:

"The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them; and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' But the olive

tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my fatness by which gods and men are honored, and go to sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come you, and reign over us.' But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go to sway over the trees?' And the trees said to the vine, 'Come you, and reign over us.' But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine which cheers gods and men, and go to sway over the trees?' Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'Come you, and reign over us.' " You probably have already guessed (or recalled) the response: the bramble — the most worth-less plant, particularly in comparison with the olive, the fig tree and the vine — was more than willing to be king of the trees, provided that all the trees give him undying allegiance. "Come and take refuge in my shade," he urged. "If you don't act faithfully, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon." As Hans Walter Wolff remarks, "This fable exposes the monarchy to resounding laughter. What irony for the bramble to praise its shade and at the same time to threaten the cedars, which give the finest shade of all! . . . The theme of the criticism is the monarchy's lust for power, which destroys the best in life" (*Anthropology of the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974], p. 193).

Perhaps even better known is Samuel's famous denunciation of kingship. The aged judge-prophet reported to the people the kinds of claims that kings or masters typically make: "Your sons he will take and appoint them for himself over his chariots and his horses, and they will run before his chariot. He will appoint them for his use as officers over thousands and as officers over fifties, to plow his fields, to reap his harvest, to make his weapons of war and the equip-



ment of his chariots. Your daughters he will take as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. Your fields, your vineyards, and your olive orchards — the best ones — he will take . . . Your slaves, both male and female, your fine cattle, and your asses he will take . . . Your flock he will tax at ten percent, and you yourselves will become his royal slaves" (1 Sam. 8:11-17).

We should not miss the repeated use of the word "take" or the fact that these taxes are used for the king's self aggrandizement or his military establishment. Such a king is no threat to establish a welfare state — would that he were!

A third example of a king as "criticized master" is provided by the example of Solomon. This king, often praised in parish educational programs for his wisdom, also instituted the use of forced labor in Israel so that he could build his various royal projects. Israel began when Yahweh delivered them from Egypt, from the house of slaves. Solomon ran that program in reverse by conscripting free Israelites for service in defiance of their theological heritage. Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam, was so insensitive on this issue, that when representatives of the Northern tribes asked him to reduce his impositions, the brash king responded with the ancient version of "You haven't seen anything yet": "Whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (1 Kgs 12:11).

Even Solomon's building the temple,

often recounted to children as a model of pious churchmanship, was at best a most ambivalent institution. The divine king, who had lived in a tent and tabernacle, and who had chosen to appear where and when he willed, was now assigned to a predictable place in the king's royal chapel. God the liberator became the patron of the Davidic dynasty, and the guarantor of the status quo. Not the one upon whom the Spirit rushed — as with Saul and David — but the one whose father happened to be king, he now became master of Israel. There *is* a good side to the Davidic dynasty, and the temple also had its positive role in the religious pilgrimage of Israel, but we should never forget that these two institutions brought with them the potential for an oppressive rulership and a religion of *ex opere operato*.

A fourth example of the dangers of kingship and of Israel's opposition to masters occurs in the story of Naboth's vineyard. This is not the place to recount the greed of Ahab, the rigging of Naboth's trial and execution by Ahab and his wife Jezebel, or the pouting of the king as he lay in his bed. The danger inherent in this incident is epitomized in the question Jezebel asked her husband, "Do you now govern (perform kingship) in Israel?" (1 Kgs 21:7). In other words, "To the king belong the spoils. Get up out of bed and enjoy the fruits of the imperial monarchy." To be king, in her estimation, was to have the trappings of kingship.

A final example of the king as master is Jehoiakim, the third last king of the

southern kingdom. Admittedly, our best source for reconstructing his reign is the Book of Jeremiah, hardly an impartial source. The prophet predicted that Jehoiakim would receive the burial of an ass, dragged out and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem (Jer. 22:19). What irritated Jeremiah — among other things — was Jehoiakim's priorities. As Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians, he decided to remodel the palace! Worse yet, Jehoiakim made his neighbor (read: subjects) serve him for nothing and paid them no wages (Jer. 22:13). The servants of God were treated as slaves! Jeremiah wished that Jehoiakim were more like his father, good king Josiah. That famous king "judged the cause of the poor and needy" — that policy exemplifies what it means to "know Yahweh."

Israel's opposition to "masters" comes as no surprise to any student of the Bible, though its radical character ought to be shocking to us who are more willing to give government the benefit of the doubt. Someone might object, of course: "Did not Israel become oppressive? Did not events like the conquest or institutions like Holy War embody the same kind of quest for mastery as did the kingship in its worst aspects?"

There are a number of responses we could make to these questions, and these responses, individually and collectively, may not be totally adequate. Consider, nevertheless, the following:

1) Revolutions can and do become establishments, and freed slaves can become as oppressive as their former masters. The prophets offered a clarion call to return to the former ways, when folks did not join house to house and lay field to field until every small farmer was forced out of business. The fact that the Old Testament contains so many passages against kings as masters, some of which were discussed above, presupposes

that kings and masters were no rare occurrence or unimportant threat. In other words, as the Bible itself admits, the charge is true: Israel did at times become a master.

2) The conquest of Canaan is a moral problem, for which no theological rationalization is ever satisfactory, but we must remember that the same God who led Israel in her wars of conquest is the same one who, the prophets announced, would wage war *against* Israel because of her apostasy. "Woe to you who desire the day of Yahweh [as a day of military victory]," Amos warned. "It will be darkness and not light" (Amos 5:18).

3) The conquest is really the flip side of another theological truth — the land had been promised to the patriarchs and matriarchs. In fact, this promise and that of descendants were the basic saving promises in Israel's earliest tradition. As Robert Frost wrote about our own American possession of the land: "The gift of land was many deeds of war."

4) Should we not ask why the Bible recounted the conquest as it did? The record of the battles in Joshua 1-12 was not part of a theological argument legitimating Israel's right to possess the land. If these chapters had been that, they would justifiably provoke our modern uneasiness. But these chapters in the Deuteronomistic History are part of a long recounting of Yahweh's faithfulness to Israel, a faithfulness that should have put Israel under obligation, but which, in fact, had been met with a series of rebellions and seekings of other gods from the day after Joshua died until 587. Do we err in demanding from Joshua 1-12 an answer to a question which these chapters were not addressing?



5) A final, partial response to this dilemma may arise out of modern reconstructions of what really happened in the Israelite conquest. George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald, for example, have argued that the conquest did not consist in an invasion of hordes of people from the desert, who gobbled up land like a nineteenth century colonial power. Rather, they believe that the conquest was basically an inside job. People resident in Palestine, living under the oppressive and stratified city state system, were motivated by a group of freed slaves who had come from Egypt to throw off their chains. This peasant's revolt was not, at least in principle, Israel's lording it over other peoples. It was, instead, an example of how the "anti-master theology" of Israel, forged in the events of Exodus and Sinai, moved people to act decisively against their overbearing overlords.

Such responses are partial, to be sure, but they should not divert us from the persistent and consistent message of the Old Testament: God is opposed to masters. Masters tend to monopolize power and to care not a fig for the weak, the oppressed, and the helpless. Masters are betrayers of Israel's birthright. Still, the record of Israel should not be used to legitimate a polity of perpetual revolution or anarchy. How *are* the children of God to rule themselves and others?

"Lords "

The term "lords" is not totally adequate for what I want to say — hence the quotation marks. What I seek is a word to be paired positively with the word servant. I seek a word that expresses positive connotations for the use of authority, that takes account of ruling responsibilities, and that is flexible enough to encompass the examples I cite below. I settled for "lord" because the Bible does use servant and "lord" positively and in tandem. When Jacob and Esau were reconciled, for example, Jacob referred to himself as servant and to Esau as his "lord" (Gen. 32:3; 33:14). So "lords" it will be, but throughout the reader must also think of "positive ruler," "responsible citizen," or the like when-ever "lord" appears. Do not construe "lords" negatively as in "He lorded it over them."

People are "lords" according to the priestly creation account. They are not prisoners of war nor essentially evil. God decreed their true status at creation when he blessed them and installed them as vice presidents in charge of his estate. Classically, this has been known as the image of God. The oldest commentary on this passage appears in our Bibles as Psalm 8:

"You have made mankind little less
than God,
you crown them with glory and
honor.
You gave them dominion over the
works of your hands;

you have put all things under their feet" (vv. 5-6).

This image of God has come under fire in recent decades because it has allegedly been the theological rationale for the excesses in Western technology and industrialization. Critics of the Judeo-Christian tradition have argued that this passage has given religious permission for strip mining, for the wasting of non-renewable resources, for polluting the atmosphere, and for sanctifying growth as an unblemished good. Some of these criticisms could be labelled "cheap shots." Others may reflect the perverse effect this passage has had because it was misunderstood. If any have used Gen. 1:28 to justify the environmental atrocities recited above, they have understood this passage as if it referred to masters in-stead of to "lords."

An ancient cylinder seal offers a corrective comment on this misunderstanding. The seal shows a man with his foot resting gently on the neck of a deer, a posture that connotes rulership. But the man depicted on the seal is at the same time arm-wrestling with a lion, which was trying to prey on the deer. Such benevolent, protective rule over the animals exemplifies what the sacred writers in Gen. 1 and Ps. 8 were trying to say about the human assignment to rule the world. How we carry on that rule and how we are friendly to the environment need spelling out in modern terms with modern understandings of environmental impact. But we need to be "lords" in creation in any case, and it would be a terrible tragedy if the recent criticisms of the image of God from secular sources would let us relax the intensity of our concern for the wise rule of all of creation.

Good Kings

Though Israel at first opposed king-

ship — and some Israelites perhaps always did — the majority in Israel learned to compromise with the new institution if through it God's rule was expressed. What is said about good kings can and should be said about any who would be "lords." Recall Ps. 72:

May the king judge your people with
righteousness,
and your poor with justice! (v. 2)
May he defend the cause of the
poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor! (v. 4) He delivers
the needy when he
calls,
the poor and all those who have no
helper.
He has pity on the weak and the
needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he
redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his
sight. (vv. 12-14).

The Messiah

This enlightened view of kings as "lords" is present also in Israel's messianic passages in which the prophets told of the good king (or kings) who was (or were) to come. The birth of the king announced in Isa. 9, inaugurates a new era, which Jesus would probably have called the age of the kingdom:

Of the increase of his (the
messiah's) government and of peace
there will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over
his kingdom, to establish it and
uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and for
evermore (v. 7)
The shoot and branch promised in Isa. 11
would be gifted with the Spirit. We



who receive the Spirit in Holy Baptism might well model our life as "lords" after his:

He shall not judge by what his eyes
see, or decide by what his ears
hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the
poor, and decide
with equity for the meek of the
earth;

and he shall smite the tyrant with
the rod of his mouth, and with the
breath of his lips he shall slay the
wicked (vv. 3-4).

Jeremiah spoke of a coming righteous branch, who would be given the name, "The Lord is our righteousness" (or: Yahweh is the source of our vindication). This person would reign as king and deal wisely; he would execute justice and righteousness in the land (Jer. 23:5).

A Blessing to the Nations

A third series of passages that spell out the job descriptions of "lords" are found in the Yahwist stratum in the Pentateuch. J reminds his readers that the power and riches of the Davidic-Solomonic empire are not something they have achieved by merit nor is their power an occasion for them to lord it over their surrounding nations. The true and realistic picture of the reader is seen in Adam and Eve, who wanted to be like God; in Abraham, who passed off his wife as his sister in order to save his own neck; in the wilderness wanderers who responded to God's gift of food and water by incessant murmuring. Abraham and Sarah

were what they were as son and daughter of God, and Israel was what she was under David and Solomon, solely because of God's unmerited promise: all of God's promises to Israel's forebears had now come true. What now?

J suggests that Israelites might be "lords" like an Abraham, who offered unflagging intercessions for those who were perishing in Sodom and Gomorrah, the ethnic ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites. These nations were actually conquered by David. Should not victorious "lords" imitate father Abraham in their attitude towards these erstwhile enemies. And what of Isaac who had been ready for peaceful agreement with the Philistines. Should Israel's relationship with the Philistines be only competition and conquest? Jacob offered material aid to Laban, his Syrian father-in-law, and the Syrians were the economic and military rivals of Israel for a considerable period of time. Should "lords" play economic hard ball, or should they offer financial assistance? Joseph's morality and wisdom brought blessings, first to Potiphar and then to all Egypt. Moses prayed for Pharaoh and led Israel out of Egypt so that they might get a blessing for the Egyptians. At the time of the Yahwist all families of the earth were blessed only in the word of promise; Israel's task still remained to be completed. By her all families of the earth were to be blessed.

God's Trusted Creatures

We are beggars, poor miserable sin-

ners; we were in bondage and we could not free ourselves. These are good and worthy confessions. But the Bible knows that in the eyes of the Creator and Redeemer we are also something else — "lords" or responsible individuals, capable of independent action. With one hand firmly locked on the doctrine of justification by faith for Christ's sake, we are also called by such passages as Deut. 30, which read:

"This commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you. . . . The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. . . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (vv. 11, 14, 19).

Walter Brueggemann has argued that the wisdom traditions are one of the best — and most unused — repositories for the kind of action that we would hope to come from "lords." Wisdom represents a protest against deferring the goal of justice or righteousness to some in-definite future or to the world to come — a game that masters have often played with blacks, women, and the poor. Wisdom seeks what is right and good, not in specific biblical injunctions or in answers at the back of the book. Wisdom knows that what needs to be done will often be determined by our common, enlightened experience. Wisdom recognizes that men and women have responsibility for their own destiny. Human choices fix human destiny. What will happen to the poor or between nations is ultimately under God's control. But God needs human lovers of the poor and human peacemakers if his will is to be done on earth. Wisdom celebrates men and women as the "lords" of creation. Our capabilities and responsibilities have to do with our relation to our natural and

social environment (*In Man We Trust*. [Richmond: John Knox, 1972], PP-17-24).

Conclusion

We need to echo Israel's criticism of masters, whether they appear in church or government or family, whether the masters are others or ourselves. Such criticism is but half of our vocation. We are also called to be free, responsible, and independent "lords," governing creation in God's stead, mimicking his messiah and that one whom we joyfully hail as the Christ. We need to be latter day Sarahs and Abrahams, Rebekahs and Isaacs, Zipporahs and Moses's, striving in a variety of religious and secular ways to bring God's blessings to the nations. We are, as God's new and trusted creatures, called to live as sensitive and caring people.

So far this has been put forward as a Judeo-Christian goal or an Old Testament-biblical goal. I would propose that we make it a distinctly Christian goal.

The old hymn, "Praise God the Lord, Ye Sons of Men," appears in non-sexist form as "Let all Together Praise our God" in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (47). Its fifth verse bears repeating, both in its older and its newer translations:

"He serves that I a lord might be,
a great exchange indeed."

Or

"He is a servant, I a lord:

How great a mystery!"

Our liberated lifestyle as "lords" is possible only and solely because of the one who, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor. Servants take the first giant step towards being "lords" by joyfully affirming:

"How strong the tender Christchild's
love!

No truer friend than he."