

CHAPTER 10

A State Is Born

“IN THOSE DAYS,” we are told in Judges 17:6, “there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

To be able to do that which is right in one's own eyes is to be free, and freedom was the way of life among the Israelites before the coming of the kings. Yet, they were not without Government, they were not lacking in those social controls that are the essence of Government. The economy of the tribesmen demanded of the individual that he adjust himself to cooperative and regularized procedures; a man who indulged his caprice when the tribe was on the march in search of grazing land would be courting disaster; it was a case of hold together or die. Tradition supplemented necessity in the orderly arrangement of life, for the tradition grew out of experience by the trial-and-error method and had proved itself beneficial. The laws of custom were sanctified because violation of them carried its own penalties, not only to the individual but also to the group. It was a conservative society; adherence to proven principles was the only way by which the pursuit of happiness could be furthered. That which was “right” in the tribesman's eyes was “right” by custom, tradition, and the laws of Yahweh, to the enumeration of which

the Old Testament, before the Book of Joshua, devotes much space. Freedom is not license.

Nor was there lack of leadership before the coming of the kings. Someone had to plan strategy and improvise tactics for the wars the tribesmen engaged in during their march to the Promised Land, and someone had to adjudicate disputes so as to prevent the chaos of internecine struggles. So came the Judges, men esteemed for their wisdom and integrity, the "sports" provided by nature for the instruction of the rank and file. The evidence leads to the conclusion that these Judges ruled by natural selection and common consent, much like the chiefs of American Indian tribes. It was agreed that the authority of the Judges was sanctified by God, but the proof of their anointment was the manner in which they exercised authority. They were leaders by virtue of their proven gift of leadership.

The significant feature of the rule of the Judges is that it lacked the power of coercion. "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes" meant that no man was compelled to do otherwise; and since "in those days there was no king in Israel" it must be presumed that there was no constabulary to enforce rules of behavior. The sole enforcement agency upon which the authority of the Judges rested was public opinion. "So said Yahweh" had the force of "so say we all."

According to one computation this kind of Government lasted about four centuries—a period, incidentally, comparable to the duration of the Roman republic. The manner of its termination is recorded in the Book of Samuel, where it is told that the elders of the tribes came to the last of the Judges and demanded that he set a king over them.

The background of this agitation for a basic constitutional

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reform is worth noting. The nomads had by this time settled down in the hills surrounding Canaan; sheepherding was giving way to agriculture; land tenure had achieved an importance it did not have during the migrations; trading, capital accumulations, and financial transactions had entered their way of life. Their economy had changed. Their new outlook on life was colored by the vision of great wealth in the valleys; there the pomp and circumstance of Baal worship in glittering temples compared favorably in their eyes with the austerity that Yahweh imposed on them, and there all manner of private and public problems were settled out of hand by omniscient and omnipotent royal establishments, relieving the populace of rigorous self-discipline. It looked good.

The immediate occasion for the revolutionary demand was what we would today call an emergency. In fact, there were two emergencies. In foreign affairs things were going badly for Israel; the Philistines had not only beaten them roundly in battle but had also made off with the sacred ark of the covenant. On the domestic front, they had lost faith in their leadership; the two sons of Samuel, whom he had appointed as assistants, did not live up to the high standards of their office; they had "turned aside after lucre, and took bribes and perverted judgment."

Samuel seems to have been a political scientist of the first water, all the more remarkable in that he had no books to go by but was guided only by his observation of kingship in operation. So that, when the elders said "make us a king to judge us like all the nations," he was displeased. The story says that he took the matter up with Yahweh, who assured him that nothing could be done about saving the Israelites from themselves, since they had given up on first principles.

It was because they had forsaken the rigorous tradition of their forefathers, with its insistence on self-reliance and personal integrity, that they had lost the victorious touch which carried them from Egypt to the outskirts of the Promised Land; the breakdown of the Judge system could be traced to the same lack of self-discipline. Therefore, said Yahweh, give them what they ask for, but as a parting shot you might "shew them the manner of the king that shall rule over them"; and tell them also that when they realize their mistake it will be too late to regain freedom: "The Lord will not hear you in that day." This is an interesting comment, seeming to stress the point that when a people put their faith in a State, rather than themselves, there is no way for them to remove the noose from their necks.

So Samuel outlined the order of things under a king. First, there will be conscription, replacing the system of voluntarism which had served the tribesmen well throughout their peregrinations, and the conscription will not be confined to military service but will include service in the king's household; what's more, women too will be subject to involuntary servitude. Then, "he will appoint him captains over thousands and captains over fifties." The term "captain" is ambiguous, referring sometimes to men of war, sometimes to what we would call a nobility, sometimes (by the kind of work assigned to them) to bureaucrats; it was in the reigns of David and Solomon that "captain" took on a variety of meanings. And, continued Samuel, the king will take from you the best of your lands "and give them to his officers and to his servants," thus establishing a landed aristocracy, which the laws of Moses clearly forbade. What's more, for the upkeep of his establishment "he will take a tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards"; apparently, compulsory taxation was

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unknown to the Israelites. To top it all off, "ye shall be his servants."

But the elders were obdurate in their demand for political authority. One could go behind the returns and make out a case against these revolutionists: perhaps they constituted a newly arisen landowning class and hoped to solidify their position under a kingship. More likely, fear had entered their hearts, as is usually the case when a people accustomed to success are faced with adversity, and they were quite willing to swap freedom for the promise of subservient security. The search for a demigod is inherent in the human makeup; fear of the problems of life tends to weaken self-reliance and to encourage belief in a deliverer. Faith in political power is a comforting flight from reality.

In any event, Samuel anointed Saul. From the very beginning of the royal establishment the troubles of Israel multiplied. There was the usual spate of wars with the Philistines, with varying degrees of success; internal dissension, heretofore rare in the experience of the tribesmen, became common. Some followed Saul, others revolted against his rule; more exactly, they resisted the establishment of those institutions which Samuel had warned them would come with a king. But, as Samuel said, there was no way of regaining freedom once the State had made its appearance, and the Judge was soon on the lookout for a new deliverer. He sought out David, but it is significant that the new king, though anointed by Samuel, had to fight his way to power; he came to the throne on the wings of what we would call a revolution. The struggle for power, embellished with moral platitudes and social-sounding whereases, had seeped into the Israelite mores.

There is a story within the story of David's accession that

is indeed a lesson in political science. The story is that a young soldier who brought David the news of Saul's death—hoping that this would be pleasing to David, whose life Saul had been after—confessed that he had had a part in dispatching the king, and for his pains David had the soldier put to death. His reason for the execution was that the soldier had defiled the office of kingship; it was a crime for an individual citizen to lay hands on the anointed. It is the way of political power to acquire a suprapersonal quality and to become in itself, regardless of the person who wields it, a shrine for public worship. Even though the incumbent proves himself unworthy, divinity doth hedge his office; it is a form of animism, by which the wielder of power is relieved of responsibility for the consequences of his use of that power. In modern times we are quick to “throw the rascals out,” but it never occurs to us that rascality is imbedded in the office or that the power invested in it can make a rascal of an honest man.

Though the people of Israel had asked for a king, the spirit of freedom did not depart from them immediately upon the granting of their wish, and Saul never really set the kingship on a solid basis. It takes time for the myth of authority to gain general acceptance. David, the second king, did better, for he had forty years in which to get the tribesmen in line with the new institution; a second generation had come to maturity during his reign, and to them the exploits of royalty were “modern,” real and vibrant, while the freedom of their forefathers sank into the limbo of a fairy tale. Even so, something of the past hung on, and David had to contend with frequent insurrections and, at the end, with a war of succession. He did succeed, as we learn from the Second Book of Samuel, in setting up the necessary framework for the func-

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tioning of a successful State, that is, in surrounding the kingship with a supporting caste of "mighty men," analogous to what we would today call a privileged class, and with a group of efficient "servants" whose functions corresponded with those of latter-day bureaucrats. In that way he facilitated the consolidation of power under Solomon.

The Saul-David-Solomon story is illustrative of the gestation of the State. At first, an aspiring chieftain fights his way to ascendancy as a lone wolf, knocking off rivals, and concentrates in himself all the power he can lay his hands on. This method has merit only insofar as the area of his sovereignty is limited to personal supervision. But it proves to be quite inefficacious, and moreover quite precarious. As his quest for power reaches beyond his purview, as it always does, he finds it necessary to delegate some of his power to and share his prerogatives with a supporting oligarchy—military, ecclesiastical (or intellectual) and, in time, commercial or industrial groups which lend themselves to his purpose in return for the special privileges he grants them. They serve as a moat to his castle. In addition to these favored blocs he must surround his citadel with a class of well-paid "servants" skilled in taking care of the details of sovereignty so that it can function with the least amount of friction.

The State is not, as many political scientists would make it, an inanimate thing; it consists of people, human beings, each of whom operates under an inner compulsion to get the most out of life with the least expenditure of labor. They differ from other human beings only in the fact that they have chosen (because they believe it to be easier) the political or predatory means of satisfying their desires rather than the economic or productive means. The fiction that the State is

an impersonal institution, something Society constructs for its own benefit, serves to hide, even from its members, the nature of its composition. Yet, if it were not for the economic advantages it grants to favored blocs, and if it were not for the emoluments and honorifics of political position, there would be no State. The State are people.

The wisdom of Solomon was demonstrated in his capacity for consolidating State power. In the first place, the underpinning of his reign was soundly constructed, for we are told that his captains and his princes and his priests and servants, the privileged classes, "lacked nothing." He bought off possible opposition. Then, he avoided to a considerable degree the costly and disruptive wars of his predecessors, and resorted to diplomatic bribery to bring under his sway the petty and potentially troublesome kings on the perimeter of his domain. His principal concern was in the management of internal affairs, in getting a good hold on his people by embellishing the myth of authority. The temple he built was a stroke of political genius, for it covered the kingship with an aura of omnipotence; so did the walled cities and the navy he built. These were make-work programs, to be sure, but they brought him much public acclaim and accomplished the primary political purpose, that of giving the State the character of a doer of great social things. This is the prerequisite of maintaining power over the people.

As for his method of financing these public works projects, there is nothing to instruct us in the story of his reign, except that he did employ slaves. (This form of exploitation was applicable under Hebrew law to aliens only.) There is also a hint that he exacted tribute from neighboring princes. But, as to taxation, we learn nothing until we come to 2 Chronicles (Chapter 10), which deals with the installation of his son

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Rehoboam. There it is told that "all Israel" pleaded with the new king thus: "Thy father made our yoke grievous; now therefore ease thou the grievous servitude of thy father, and the heavy yoke that he put on us, and we will serve thee."

It was, then, by heavy taxes that the State of Israel attained the apex of its glory under Solomon. Its opulence reflected the poverty of the people. And so it must be. Society, it should be kept in mind, is a group of people who cooperate with one another in order that they may severally and individually improve their circumstances, and the techniques by which Society achieves its purpose are production and exchange. There is no other way by which Society can thrive. Whatever deprives the members of Society of the fruits of their labors is a deterrent of the human purpose that brought them together; it is a desocializing force. And among the devices that men have invented to defeat the ends of Society none is more devastating than compulsory taxation, because it is a constant drain on their property, tending to increase as they show more and more enterprise. The State, on the other hand, thrives on what it can exact of Society; its temples are built with taxes, its bureaucracy or enforcement agency grows in size and arrogance by the same means, and it is with taxes that the State buys the support of those who might otherwise turn against it. The more taxes the richer the State, the poorer the people; the more taxes the stronger the State, the weaker the people; the interests of the two institutions are diametrically in opposition. Resistance to the State diminishes in the degree of its confiscations, and ultimately, when the tax load becomes a yoke, subservience to the State becomes the necessary condition of living.

The designation of taxation as a yoke is a nice piece of biblical directness. A yoke is worn by an ox, a beast of bur-

den, which by nature is incapable of claiming a property right in the products of its labors. It follows that when a human being is deprived of that right his status approximates that of an ox, and if taxation takes all he produces beyond that needed to sustain life (the wages of an ox), it can rightly be called a yoke. The Israelites who pleaded with Rehoboam to lower the tax load which Solomon (the State) had put on them were quite literal.

The story goes on to say that Rehoboam rejected the plea of "all Israel," that he in fact promised them an increase in taxes. Then it tells of a revolt against taxes by the people of Judah, a political subdivision that periodically rejected the suzerainty of Jerusalem: when Hadoram, Rehoboam's chief collector of tribute, made his rounds among them they "stoned him with stones, that he died." The incident points up another lesson in political science, namely, that the State never achieves complete ascendancy over Society (if it did, Society would disintegrate and the State would collapse from lack of nutrition) and that there are always critics and rebels. There were many kings after Solomon in Israel, and all were plagued with prophets who called upon the people to return to first principles. In 2 Chronicles it says: "Israel rebelled against the house of David unto this day."