

ISRAEL'S STRUGGLE WITH POLITICAL GOVERNANCE DEMOCRATIC TENDENCIES AND LEADERSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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There are two reasons for addressing the theme of democracy in our age from the perspective of the Bible, and especially of the Old Testament. The first one is the frequently made connection with the *rejection of democratic ideas* by religious groups, namely in fundamentalist circles.¹ They often see an opposition between what 'God' has told them to do and the will of the people, believing that the latter have to adjust themselves to the divine intentions.² In their opinion, belief in God and democracy are opposed to one another.

The second reason is the *suitability of the OT* for our theme. It describes a huge variety of experiences with different forms of governance, throughout many centuries.³ What has been learned and gathered from all these events, which took place in many and varied circumstances, has been written down and belongs to some of the oldest documents of mankind still accessible to us today. This gives us a chance to 'dialogue' with very valuable information about struggles with leadership similar to those we encounter in our own age. Furthermore, the OT has reflected on the social and political experiences from various points of view and thus offers a broad spectrum of positions regarding our theme.

¹ Less than a month before our conference, on April 22nd, 2012, a militant Islamist in Tunisia declared in an interview (in EuroNews) democracy to be a "western invention", opposed to their conviction that God decides and orders what has to be done.

² This position normally does not reflect that what 'God' has commanded has also been shaped by human intentions and is thus subject to ideologies.

³ If we leave aside the Book of Genesis, we may say that from the Book of Exodus onward (describing a time approximately around 1200 BC) the OT covers a time span of more than a thousand years, with the Book of Daniel and others towards the end of the Hebrew Bible, in the 2nd century BC. The Greek books of the OT, especially the Book of Wisdom, would further prolong this time frame into the 1st century AD.

1 No Democracy in Ancient Israel – An Historical Overview

In order to evaluate the stances of the books of the Old Testament with regard to democracy, we have first to look at *Israel's history*. There are mainly two sources for this: a) the archaeological remains, and b) what the biblical books tell us about it. The historical remains (a) can hardly be connected with 'democracy', as they mostly offer only indirect, very selective and casual evidence of the organization and style of government of a group or community.⁴ On the other hand, the biblical books (b) present Israel's history frequently from a later perspective, looking back into the past with the notions and interests of the time of their authors; thus they may be biased, and their testimonies have to be assessed critically. Nevertheless, as we have no other sources, we have to use them for our investigation, whilst being cautious in their interpretation.

As the Book of Genesis does not talk about 'government' in Israel, we have to begin with the Book of Exodus where Israel is called a 'people' for the first time.⁵ Apart from a few exceptions,⁶ the main form of leadership is hierarchic and mostly exercised by *Moses*, who is appointed by God and endowed with highest authority, not only with regard to his people, but also with respect to Pharaoh.⁷ Moses' role as a unique leader, elevated above all others, continues all through the Books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, until his death, despite some criticism and conflicts.⁸

The *premonarchic period shows a similar picture*. Joshua, the successor to Moses, is not chosen by the people, but designated by God.⁹ After his death in Josh 24:29, the next book, Judges, describes the period of these charismatic leaders. Once again, it is not the people who decide about their leaders, but God who sends these saviours, and his spirit moves them.¹⁰

The next book, Samuel, brings a *difficult transition*. Starting with 1 Sam 8-12, it describes the people's desire for a king, and the ambivalent experiences with the first king, Saul.¹¹ The next two kings, David and Solomon, are also appointed by God, and judged as

⁴ The excavations in Samaria, e.g., with the temples and palace buildings of the 8th century BC, point to the existence of a ruling upper class, whereas other settlements, like Tirzah in the 9th century BC, display mostly similar houses and thus seem to be a sign of a more 'equal' society.

⁵ Exod 1:9.

⁶ See below 2, Democratic Tendencies.

⁷ God commissions Moses in Exod 3-4 as a leader for his people. In 4:16 he is called 'God' in relation to his brother Aaron, and in 7:1 this designation is used for him even in relation to Pharaoh.

⁸ Starting with Exod 5:21, and reaching the highpoint in Num 11-21.

⁹ Num 27:18-21.

¹⁰ Judg 2:16, 18 (literally "raise up" judges); 3:10; 13:25, etc.

¹¹ The reasons for his failure are well analyzed by Berges (1989).

better, yet are not free from defects.¹² The Books of Kings continue with this picture: no king is elected democratically,¹³ most of them are assessed negatively, and even good ones may have flaws. On the whole, the period of the monarchy, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel as well as in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, did not know democratic leadership.

When the Northern Kingdom perished, due to the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the 8th century, and the capital Samaria was destroyed in 720 BC, the country became *dependent*. The same happened with the downfall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, only this time to become subject to the Neo-Babylonian supremacy (605-539), and later to form a part of the Persian Empire (539-331). In all these centuries there are *neither indications of a democracy* nor even the preconditions for it.

This state of affairs lasts *under the Ptolemaic and Seleucid overlords* until the mid-2nd century. It is only afterwards, in the Maccabean revolt and the following battles that 'Israel' regains its independence, starting with Simon the Maccabean (142-135) and John Hyrcanus I. (135-104). Once again, as in the first half of the first millennium, the people are led by a dynasty, this time of the Hasmoneans, but it is short-lived and ends with the Roman rule.¹⁴

We may *summarize thus*: The overview of the whole period covered by the Old Testament¹⁵ shows that Israel experienced long spells of monarchy and of foreign rule, but *never a democracy*. Only a few leaders receive a positive evaluation; most rulers – their own and foreign ones – are judged negatively and are held responsible for the downfall of the country.

2 Democratic Tendencies in the Old Testament

The picture drawn above conveys the broad lines of Israel's history with regard to leadership, and it is very clear about hierarchic structures prevailing all the time, be it Israel's own leaders and kings, or foreign rulers. Nevertheless, we can find in some texts signs that this 'normal' form of political governance was questioned, and that other ideas were also present which favoured a *more balanced distribution of power* throughout the society.

¹² See, among other cases, David's murdering of Uriah in 2 Sam 11, and Solomon's inclination towards other Gods in 1 Kings 11.

¹³ Sometimes, e.g. in 2 Kings 21:24, we have an indication that parts of the people are decisively involved in the designation of the king. However, it is unclear who this group called "people of the country" really is – some hold them to be a kind of nobility – and in this case also, an offspring of the Davidic dynasty is chosen.

¹⁴ From 63 BC onward.

¹⁵ We covered the whole time span, from the first book, Genesis, to a late book like 1 Maccabees. This could be further extended to the latest book of the OT, Wisdom, probably originating from the turn of the eras, or slightly later: even then, Israel was subject to Roman rule and could not choose its own form of leadership.

2.1 Some first hints

Right at the beginning, and with respect to Moses, the very first person to exercise leadership within 'Israel', we find the decisive question: "Who has made you a ruling person and a judge above us?" (Exod 2:14). In this way, the Israelite who was acting unjustly, focusses on the crucial issue, namely, who has authority in a society? In the background of this is the sentiment that such a position as ruler or judge 'destroys' the *'original' equality of all members* within a people, and therefore needs a special legitimization.¹⁶ That the Bible addresses this issue at the very first possible moment indicates its awareness and sensitivity to the precarious matter of governance.

In the same book there are other texts showing a feeling for the *need to distribute power*, and not let it be concentrated in only one person. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, perceives a burdensome situation, whereby many people must wait for a long time to be judged. He counsels Moses to appoint further judges (Exod 18:21), and thus alleviate his and the people's burden. It is a kind of anticipation of what later will be called the "principle of subsidiarity",¹⁷ and at the same time it lays the burden of leadership, in this case for jurisprudence, on more shoulders throughout the people. *Participation in government* is a key idea of democracies, and also essential to the Torah,¹⁸ the binding legislation of Israel.

A few chapters later, within the same book, the "*elders of Israel*", a group already mentioned earlier,¹⁹ have a prominent role in the celebration of the covenant with God. God himself includes them in his invitation in Exod 24:1, and in v9-11 he allows them, on the occasion of the conclusion of the covenant, to see him, and to hold a meal on the mountain. They are representatives²⁰ of the people sharing responsibility in leading Israel.

The ongoing complaints of some fellow men bring Moses to lament before God in Num 11:10-15. God reacts in v16-17 and 24-29 by commissioning *70 elders* to join him in

¹⁶ Moses cannot answer this question by himself; it is only God in Exod 3, who through his commission solves the problem. The issue raised in Exod 2:14 is at the root of authority within societies.

¹⁷ According to it, every member or institution is asked to fulfill what is within its reach and capacities. Only more difficult or overarching topics and problems are transferred to the next higher level.

¹⁸ The importance of Exod 18 is underlined by its 'repetition' in Deut 1:12-17, in the first chapter of the last book of the Torah. There Moses, with the consent of the people, accentuates again the need to share authority with others for the task of judgment. For this passage, see Otto (2012) 342-466. Both texts are excellently analyzed in their relationship and meaning by Levinson (2008) 62-68.

¹⁹ God had given them a prominent role already in the vocation of Moses (Exod 3:16, 18), as addressees of his message and company of Moses in his dealings with Pharaoh. Later, in the Pesach in Egypt, Moses asks them to mediate God's orders for the feast to the people (Exod 12:21).

²⁰ V11 even calls them, with a singular term in Hebrew, "nobles".

the task of governance. The necessary precondition for this is that they receive from Moses' spirit (v17, 25).

Three chapters later, in Num 14, the scouts' discouraging information about the Promised Land arouses despair in the people and the desire to *elect a new chief on their own* and turn back to Egypt (v1-4). This leads to God's intention to destroy them (v12), but Moses succeeds in placating him. Recognizing their disobedience, the people now decide in v40-45, for a second time on their own, to go up to the land; once again this means a transgression of God's command and ends in disaster.²¹ It seems as if Num 14 deliberately draws the outcome of 'democratic' decisions as terrible and deterrent.

I want to conclude this short survey with two passages dealing with the *role of the king in Israel*. The first one, Deut 17:14-20, is the only law regarding the king in the Ancient Near East and conceives him as a *primus inter pares* within his people. He must be "from among your brothers" (v15) and represents the type of an ideal Israelite, dedicated to God's Torah and reading it daily.²²

The other passage in 1 Sam 8:10-18 stands in contrast to that. Samuel has, on God's mandate, to communicate the "*right of the king*" to the people. It is a warning that the introduction of kingship in Israel will lead to increasing inequalities. In the end, the formerly free citizens will become subjects,²³ and all their children, servants and belongings will be exploited. The demand for a king also endangers the Lord's role as sole king of the people.²⁴ Whereas Deut 17 portrays an 'ideal' king, 1 Sam 8 depicts 'reality', namely the introduction of injustice and disparity to a community which formerly was more balanced and equal.²⁵

Looking back at this selection of texts representative of our theme, we may say: The Old Testament testifies to a *number of essential features for democracies*, among them the feeling for, and appreciation of the equal value of all members of a society, the need to distribute power, and the complexity of the issue of authority within a people, especially of exercising it. However, the only two instances of democratic decisions (in Num 14) turn out to be complete failures. One cannot but interpret this as a stern warning against 'people power'.

²¹ This event is so important that it is repeated and further emphasized at the beginning of Deut (1:41-44).

²² V18-19, to be compared with Psa 1:(1-)2. Levinson (2008) 76-79, brings in the aspect of the "Transformation of the Monarchy", with regard to what was usual in the Ancient Near East.

²³ At the end of v17. A clear and sharp critique of the Monarchy is present in "Jotham's tale" in Judg 9:7-15; for this see Ska (2008) 191-209, especially 205-206.

²⁴ 1 Sam 8:7; 12:12.

²⁵ This mirrors a consciousness of the equal value of all members of the society, which can be seen as an indication of an awareness of a pillar which is important for democracy.

2.2 Explicit indications of ‘democratic’ awareness

The texts reviewed so far mostly touch indirectly on issues connected with ‘democratic’ ideas and values. However, there are at least three events in Israel’s faith history that clearly indicate the *consultation of all the people and the necessity of asking their consent for important decisions* (2.2.1). Furthermore, we find a long text in the Torah that *explicitly and paradigmatically questions God’s institution of hierarchical leadership* conferred to Moses and Aaron (2.2.2). In this section we will deal with these seemingly contradictory stances.

2.2.1 Request of consensus

a) God’s offer of a covenant in Exod 19

When the people arrive at Mount Sinai, God addresses Moses in Exod 19:3 with a command to speak “to the House of Jacob” and “to the children of Israel” and tell them that he wants to grant them a covenant with him under the condition that they really listen to him (Exod 19:5-6). This divine offer will incise thoroughly on the *status not only of entire Israel, but also of all its members*.

Corresponding to the import of such a change, in v7-8 two levels of consent are involved. First (in v7), Moses assembles the “elders of the people”,²⁶ as those carrying more responsibility for the society. Yet this is not enough, as is shown by the immediately following v8, which also carries a solemn introduction: “And all the people answered together and said: ‘All what Yhwh has said, we will do.’”

Only then can Moses take their answer back to God. The first person plural (“we”), the mentioning of “all the people” and the added emphasis of “together” lay weight on the fact that *for such an important decision the consensus of the whole community is necessary*.²⁷ Even God ‘depends’ on the people’s acceptance of his offer.

b) The conclusion of the covenant in Exod 24

After the initial approval, the details of the ‘deal’ have to be agreed. The two law documents, the Decalogue in Exod 20:1-17, and the “Book of the Covenant”, Exod 20:22-23:33, state the divine conditions for the covenant. Only after having been told them and having *twice consented* to them (Exod 24:3, 7), can the covenant be concluded in v8.

²⁶ See already in 2.2.1 their function in Exod 24.

²⁷ Also noticed by Childs (1974) 367, who speaks of “corporate Israel”.

This passage at the beginning of Exod 24 has a number of *interesting details*. At first God's commandments are only expressed in speech (in v3), but then, in a second step, they are written down (v4) and presented to the people as a scroll (v7). This means that the foundations of the decision are fixed and can be consulted at any time in the future. As in Exod 19:8, here in 24:3 "all the people" answer, even with "one voice" which underlines the unanimity of the community. In between the repeated approval we find in v4 the indication that Moses "rose up in the morning". This reveals that one day elapsed before the people confirmed their final assent.²⁸

c) A comparison with the parallel accounts in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy, to a large extent, retells Exodus events, including God's theophany on Mount Sinai. It differs from Exod 19-24 in that it *does not mention the approval* of the people in the parallel account in Deut 4-5.

Deut 26 would have been another opportunity to show the people's consent. It focuses in v17f on an intricate rhetorical interplay on the mutual declaration of God and the people that they will enter into the covenant; the latter have *no voice therein*, and shortly afterwards it seems to be concluded (27:9), once again without any trace of the people themselves approving it. It is only Moses who reports that they agreed to God's intent and that the covenant has already been installed.

Deut 28:69 introduces the new Moab covenant, a renewal of the one at Mount Sinai for the present generation. It, too, contains *no explicit acceptance* on behalf of the people; yet 29:28, although on a different level,²⁹ might be a kind of suggested answer, showing their approval of the treaty with God.

Obviously the Book of Deuteronomy conceives the role of the people and the importance of their consent for ponderous decisions *very differently* from the Book of Exodus. Whereas the latter requires the consensus of all the community, the former can do without it, laying everything in the hands of Moses as the publicly proposed and divinely installed mediator.³⁰ As Exod predates Deut, it becomes clear that an originally diverse concept has later, in Deut, been changed, giving less weight to 'democratic' participation in governing the society.

²⁸ Markl (2009) 269, interprets this as "to sleep on the matter", and stresses its importance for making grave decisions.

²⁹ For the function of this verse, as an acknowledgement on the side of the "implicit addressees", see Markl (2012) 104-107.

³⁰ The comparison of Exod 20:18-21 with its very much extended parallel passage in Deut 5:23-33 further underlines the emphasis in Deut on Moses as sole intermediary.

d) The people's commitment in Josh 24

The end of the conquest marks the beginning of a new era. Josh 24 reports the deaths of Joshua (v29-30) and of the Priest Eleazar, son of Aaron (v33), and indicates thus that the time of the forefathers³¹ and the Exodus generation definitely is over. Before dying, at the end of his life, Joshua assembles Israel in Shechem and *demands a choice* from the people (Josh 24:14-15) with regard to whom they serve. Three times the people declare freely their adherence to the Lord (v16-18, 21, 24).

The transition from the period of God's promises³² to a 'free life' in the Promised Land, starting after Joshua 24 with the Book of Judges, is a *critical step in the history of Israel*. It is very similar to the change from servitude in Egypt to the new existence in a covenant relationship with God which originated on Mount Sinai, in Exod 19-24. In both instances, where pivotal decisions are taken, the consent of all the people is required, and it is given. Even after the 'Torah', and after the Book of Deuteronomy, in Josh 24, once again the people's assent is sought, and deemed necessary.

2.2.2 Criticism of Moses' (and Aaron's) 'authoritarian' leadership and position

We have already encountered the first critique of Moses in Exod 2:14 (see 2.1 above), and this is only the beginning of a whole series. He and his brothers are reproached for their leadership in Exod 5:21; 14:1-12; 15:24; 16:2-3, and in many further instances. Here, I concentrate on *one exemplary case* which, more than others, shows an explicit awareness of 'democratic thinking', namely Num 16.

The conflict in Num 16 does not arise from external reasons, like food,³³ thirst,³⁴ or fear when faced with the inhabitants of the Promised Land.³⁵ It concerns the way in which Moses and Aaron *govern*, and it is raised by a group around Korah, Datan and Abiram, involving 250 other renowned men (v1-2),³⁶ who are also called "leaders of the congregation,

³¹ See for this the notice of the burial of Joseph's bones in v32, relating back to the very end of the Book of Genesis (Gen 50:25-26), and to Exod 13:19.

³² The last promise remaining open was that God will give the country of their sojourning to the descendants of the Patriarchs. The Book of Joshua reports its fulfillment. This suggests that something new will begin thereafter.

³³ E.g. Num 11:4-6.

³⁴ An example is Num 20:2-5.

³⁵ As in Num 13:32-14:4. The fear arises from the "evil report" brought forward by the spies.

³⁶ The Hebrew text of Num 16:1 mentions also another person named "On"; yet he plays no further role in subsequent events.

chosen ones for the assembly". This shows that the conflict revolves around authority and power within the society of Israel. They reproach Moses and Aaron: "Enough with you! The whole assembly, they all are holy, and Yhwh is among them. Why do you rise up above the community of Yhwh?" (Num 16:3).

This is the most outspoken statement of the *equality of all members* of the faithful and at the same time the most explicit criticism of the superior role of Moses and Aaron, raised by another descendant of Levi³⁷ and supported by many other leaders of the people (v2). On the surface level we can observe the opposition of "you" (for Moses and Aaron) and the reference to the entire congregation ("the whole assembly, they all"); this seems to point to the violation of a democratic principle which here is applied to a religious congregation. However, this reproach stems from a group which itself is already respected and strives for more dominion.³⁸ Thus their reasoning is ambiguous: under the guise of defending the people's rights and status we can discover a hidden intention to increase their own sphere of influence.

The case in Num 16 is decided by God, and the outcome is fatal. Korah, Datan and Abiram, with their families, are swallowed by the earth (v20-34), and the 250 renowned men are destroyed by fire in v35.³⁹ The narration with the most outspoken declaration of a basic democratic idea thus *ends in disaster*. This can, at least partially, be attributed to the evil intent of its proponents, but, as a whole, also displays the Old Testament's preference for a hierarchic principle.⁴⁰

2.3 Further 'democratic' elements

After having dealt with the most explicit references, I now turn to some less obvious passages. Mostly they contain just short allusions to democratic ideas; nevertheless they testify to the fact that in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, too, *the value of the entire congregation and of every individual in it* was seen and affirmed.

God's answer to David, communicated by the prophet Nathan, in 2 Sam 7:4-17 is a kind of foundational text for the Davidic dynasty. There, in v14, God promises for David's offspring: "I, I will be to him a father, and he, he will be to me a son." This text legitimates

³⁷ Num 16:1 presents Korah as great-grandson of Levi, as is also Aaron (see the genealogy in Exod 6:18, 20-21). He represents a noble Levite group to whom also a number of Psalms (like Psa 42-44; 46-49) are attributed.

³⁸ The end of Num 16:10 reveals their intent to achieve also priesthood.

³⁹ Here they are charged of having offered illegitimate incense.

⁴⁰ Num 16 does not in any way concede to shift even only a part of Moses' or Aaron's authority to the people, as v3 seemed to request. This is quite different from Num 11, where Moses himself asked to be relieved of the burden of leading the entire congregation alone (see above 2.1).

the monarchy, but in Jer 31:9 it is taken up and applied⁴¹ to all the people: “I will be a ‘father’ for Israel, and Ephraim, he is my firstborn.”⁴² This means that the old promise to David is reused but completely changed in its application, involving now, instead of the king, the whole community and granting it divine support, as formerly offered to the royal house.

The same chapter, Jer 31, also contains another famous promise, namely the announcement of a “New Covenant” in v31-34. God pledges there in the last verse: “... all of them will know me, from their smallest to their greatest” (v34). Formerly there was a difference in ‘religious knowledge’, and some had to teach and exhort others to come to know God.⁴³ As Jer 31:9 had given ‘royal status’ to the entire people, now in v34 *every individual is granted personal familiarity and closeness to God*. This equality of all members of the society is a bedrock for democratic thinking.

Another interesting topic is the convocation of “general assemblies”, uniting the whole community for one occasion and thus showing the common bond between all of them. Already Moses in Deut 31:10-12 orders “all Israel” to appear for the reading of the Torah every seven years at the Feast of Booths. Neh 8 comes very close to it, mentioning also, at various times, the reading of the Torah, and laying emphasis on this feast.⁴⁴ Neh 8:1 starts with: “All the people assembled as *one man*”. Such a reunion of the entire society, oriented towards commonly shared values, in unanimity and acceptance of the equality of all individuals in it, prepares the ground for democratic processes.

A last hint for a development towards democratic thinking can be perceived in Psa 8. There, in v5-8, God appoints (weak)⁴⁵ man to rule over his creation, and he confers glory on him – as if he were a king. The *divine grant of royal status, privilege, and task is now a distinguishing feature of every individual*, a sign of a shift from ‘monarchical’ thinking to a new awareness of the same high value of everybody in the congregation.

Dispersed throughout later books⁴⁶ of the Old Testament, we *find a change in consciousness and attitudes with regard to the role of every individual*. We may interpret these

⁴¹ Böckler (2000) 271-276.

⁴² “Ephraim” is another designation for the people; the intensification from “son” to “firstborn” is probably connected with Exod 4:22.

⁴³ This is indicated by the beginning of Jer 31:34: “And no longer will they teach one another: ‘Know Yhwh!’, but ...”. The expression for reciprocity, here translated by ‘one another’, is twice repeated in Hebrew.

⁴⁴ Already Neh 7:72 had indicated “the seventh month”, and Neh 8:14-17 explicitly describes the celebration of the Feast of Booths.

⁴⁵ The Hebrew word for “man” and the expression “son of man” in v5 underline human frailty.

⁴⁶ The Book of Jeremiah quotes many other biblical books, among them also Exodus and other books of the Torah, dealt with above, and therefore has to be later than them. In my opinion it reacts to them and has been written in its present form in the fourth century BC. The Book of Nehemiah is still later, and probably also Psa 8, as they both belong to the third part of the Hebrew Bible.

texts as signs of a heightened consciousness of the contribution of all members of the society, of an acceptance of their increased importance, and as a preparation for new⁴⁷ ways of organizing and governing the community of the faithful.

Looking back at this second part, we can make the following assessment:

a) There are clear elements in several books of the Old Testament which confirm *basic democratic principles*.

b) *Two key events* in Israel's early history, the conclusion of the covenant at Mount Sinai, and the transition after the period of the conquest to the independent existence in the Promised Land shortly before the death of Joshua, are marked by the people's unanimous⁴⁸ consent. Important decisions for the community as a whole need the backing of public and freely given support.

c) Later books in the Hebrew Bible, too, show *tendencies towards democratic ideas*. They ascertain, for the final phase of the Old Testament, an increase in the appreciation of the high and equal value of every individual, as God's partner and member of his people. This development is all the more astonishing as Israel never was a democracy (see above 1).

3 Results and Reflection

3.1 Results

a) The OT recognizes democratic elements, like consultation and consent of the people, and its participation in important decisions, yet *only rarely and not systematically*.

b) During all its history, ancient Israel never was a democracy and normally did not practice the principle of majority for taking decisions, as superseding a minority. The – postulated? – ideal was the unanimous resolution of the whole congregation, practiced only in very rare instances in a distant past, whereas the *political reality for centuries* was dominated by kings, influential groups like clan leaders, nobility, elders, priests, and, even longer, by subjection to foreign powers.

c) This picture does not differ widely from the *New Testament*. There, too, we find hierarchic structures, among Jesus and his disciples, in the Early Church, with Peter and the other Apostles as leading figures, and also in the historical background of that time.

⁴⁷ 'New' for Israel, not generally, as Greece had democracies already centuries earlier.

⁴⁸ This feature seems to be idealistic, but corresponds to the desire that the society be fundamentally united in its religious and ethical orientation. There is also a question as to whether this description of the events at Mount Sinai and at the assembly in Shechem in Josh 24, are historically realistic, or not rather projections into the past of what is wishful thinking. Even if this is the case, this would still more point to a support for such ideas.

3.2 Reflection

Most of the books of the Hebrew Bible originated in Persian times and later, within a *theocratic structure and with the temple in Jerusalem as its center*. They mirror the supremacy of the priestly class and the ruling elite connected with it. They also try to legitimate this form of governance.

Nevertheless, crucial passages like Exod 19-24 and Jos 24 clearly point to the *necessity of seeking the approval of the whole society* before making important decisions. Other texts show an increased perception of the role of every individual. This means that, despite a different political system, God's people developed a sensitivity to democratic issues and values.

Israel, throughout its history, never practiced democracy as a form of political organization. Although missing this governmental structure, there were times of well-being and prosperity, connected with leading figures like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, 'good' kings, Ezra, Nehemiah – this raises the *question of whether God's people needs a democracy* to achieve its goals, to become God's "treasured possession, ... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6)? A whole range of questions follows from this: Are democracies really the best form of governance? And which form of democracy is indeed 'just'? Aren't 'good leaders', as in Israel's past, an alternative to consider? But how can they be found, and will they get public support? Given the human inclination to cling to power, how can corruption and misuse of political responsibility be averted, even in democracies? How is it possible, that those in charge of governing, including political parties, for example, can continuously conceive their task as a service for the benefit of all the people? What role is attributed to God and to religious orientation in all these processes?

Israel's struggle with political governance, throughout the whole period of the Old Testament, provides a *stimulating challenge to reflection, even today*.⁴⁹ The testimonies to the various options given in its books are signs of ongoing discussions about different forms of leadership of any society, and especially of God's people, and they invite us to question our convictions regarding this issue.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Levinson (2008) 86, describes the draft constitution of Deuteronomy aptly as an "ideal type: both a heuristic tool for the critical analysis of social reality and an articulation of a system of values".

⁵⁰ I thank Mrs. Felicity Stephens for the correction of the English of this article.

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