Hobbes's Samuel

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Hillman's Hobbes

On Arye Hillman's account (2009), when Thomas Hobbes appeals to 1 Samuel to describe the rights/liberties of a king in Chap. 20 of *Leviathan*, he “misuses” his sources. Hillman thinks that Hobbes was being “deceptive” in omitting the last verse of the passage that Hobbes quotes (1 Samuel, Chap. 8, vs. 11–18). Hillman also thinks this deception matters, given the influence of Hobbes in the history of political thought.

Whether there was indeed deception here depends on three questions: First, what was Hobbes' purpose in using this quotation? Second, does the omitted sentence radically alter the evaluation of kingship that the relevant passage conveys? And third, what did Hobbes's original readers take him to be doing? I have no evidence on the last of these questions and so will not address it. But the former two questions invite reflection on the two texts and the intentions of the two authors involved.

Samuel

The pages of *Public Choice* are perhaps a surprising location for a little biblical exegesis; but the precise interpretation of the passage in contention is crucial and it will be useful

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to set out the relevant chapter (Chap. 8) from the First Book of Samuel in its entirety. The passage from Hobbes that Hillman quotes is in italics; the “omitted” phrase that is the basis of Hillman’s critique is in bold type. The remainder of chapter eight is inserted to provide context, the precise relevance of which I shall emphasize as the discussion proceeds.

[1] When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. [2] The name of his first-born son was Jo’el, and the name of his second, Abi’jah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. [3] Yet his sons did not walk in his (Samuel’s) ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

[4] Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, [5] and said to him, “Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.” [6] But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD.

[7] And the LORD said to Samuel, “Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. [8] According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. [9] Now then, hearken to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” [10] So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking a king from him.

[11] He said, *“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; [12] and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. [13] He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. [14] He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. [15] He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. [16] He will take your menservants and maidservants, and the best of your cattle and your asses, and put them to his work. [17] He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.*

[18] And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

[19] But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; and they said, “No! but we will have a king over us, [20] that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” [21] And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. [22] And the LORD said to Samuel, “Hearken to their voice, and make them a king.”

Hobbes

What does Hobbes see in this entire passage? Basically, and shorn of the detail (detail which I shall argue below is by no means entirely irrelevant), I suggest that Hobbes identifies two *predictions*, only one of which he takes to be especially interesting or relevant to his project.

The first of these predictions is what we can term the “king’s-action” prediction: *“these will be the ways of the king who will reign over you”*.

The second is the “regret” prediction: *“you will cry out in that day because of your king”*.

Many commentators (Hillman I think among them) have thought that these two predictions are supposed to carry normative force. They have tended to interpret the first prediction

as a kind of rhetorical overstatement, designed specifically to induce the people of Israel to change their minds. And in relation to the second prediction, the fact that the people will subsequently cry out to the Lord because of their king's actions is taken (at least by Hillman) to be decisive evidence that having a king is a deeply bad idea!

But Hobbes does not, I think, see the first prediction as a rhetorical overstatement at all: he sees it rather as an accurate description of the way that kings actually behave. And in my view, Hobbes is entitled to take this biblical prediction of a king's actions entirely at face value. When God says to Samuel: "show them the ways of the king who shall rule over them", there is no suggestion that God is encouraging Samuel to indulge in rhetorical excess. To be sure, the elders are "warned", rather than say "instructed".¹ But Samuel's assigned task is to provide the facts: not to exaggerate them.

On my understanding of Hobbes's general argument, his point in using this passage is not to offer a heroic view of kingship. If that *had* been his purpose, this is surely an extraordinary passage for him to select. Hobbes's aim is rather to emphasize that the benefits of social order come at a cost. Of course, Hobbes, like the leaders of the tribes that are petitioning Samuel, does think that a king is worth having. "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch", Hobbes might be construed as remarking. But Hobbes also fully understands that this fact is not decisive. As he might put it, lunches are not free; but that is not grounds for choosing to starve!

Here, for example, is how the relevant chapter (20) of *Leviathan* ends (a mere page after the Samuel quotation):

"So that it appeareth plainly, to my understanding, both from Reason and Scripture, that the Sovereign power, whether placed in one man, as in Monarchy, or in on assembly of men, as in popular or aristocratical Commonwealths, is as great as possibly men can be imagined to make it. And though, of so unlimited a power, men may fancy many evil consequences, yet the consequences of the want of it, which is perpetual war of every man against his neighbour, are much worse." (Hobbes 1651/1962, Chap. 20, p. 144)

Hobbes has often been described as being the most 'economistic' of the early modern political theorists.² Here, he can be understood as making the point (familiar to all rational choice scholars) that normative analysis involves "optimization"—or choice under constraint. That is, one chooses the best available point among a set, all members of which are imperfect to some extent. Within that framework, evaluation is always comparative: there is always a "compared to what?" question hovering somewhere near at hand.

Of course, much of Hobbes's analysis in *Leviathan* will be concerned precisely to spell out what the relevant alternative is, and to show that, given reasonable (and as he sees it, biblically grounded) assumptions about how a king will operate, that alternative is indeed "much worse"! In this passage however, Hobbes is focused exclusively on the "king's action" prediction.

It is worth emphasizing the "optimizing" aspect, characteristic of Hobbes's approach, because much moral philosophy (and, by association, much political philosophy) directs attention to isolating a conceptual *ideal*—one that abstracts from the constraints of resource limitation, imperfect information and the flawed character of ordinary economic and political agents. Whether this latter approach gives rise to anything that could plausibly guide

¹The translations vary in the word used here. But the basic message seems to be that the people harbour illusions about what the king will do and they are to be disabused of these.

²For a recent statement, see Kliemt (2009).

real choice among institutions or policies is a matter of some contention, with economists generally taking the skeptical position.³ And Hobbes is, in this respect, totally on the economists' side. He is pragmatic, empirical, and analytic. (His explicit ambition was to do for the social sciences what Isaac Newton had done for the physical.) Hobbes clearly does not think that a king is "ideal" in this abstract sense. But he does think kingship is "optimal" given the relevant constraints!

Hobbes might have gone on (as Hillman would have liked him to) to register Samuel's *second* and quite distinct prediction that the people will later complain. But Hobbes does not believe that such complaints would be justified. Indeed, he believes that any such complaints would be morally reprehensible—because they are hospitable to a descent into anarchy. In Hobbes's lexicon, that which emerges from processes that players rationally choose cannot be "unjust". What justice (and rationality) require, on Hobbes's view, is that the choosers be tolerably well-informed about the alternatives: and that is, as I see it, precisely what Hobbes seeks to take from the Samuel passage. On my reading, the second prediction is, for Hobbes, ultimately uninteresting. Perhaps the people will complain later; perhaps they won't. But either way, they shouldn't!

To summarise: Hobbes's use of the Samuel passage is directed at the prediction of what a king will do. In his choice of what to cite, he wants to focus on this aspect—and not on either the second prediction (which he sees as being quite separate) or on the normative implication that Samuel (or Hillman) seem to want to draw. Hobbes doesn't think that that normative conclusion follows from *either* prediction, and he doesn't agree with it anyway. But like a good economist, he wants to keep the positive and the normative separate. And like a good analyst, he wants to distinguish logically independent predictive claims. So he quotes exactly that part of the account that bears on what he wishes to claim and sets the rest aside. So understood, this seems to be not so much deception as sound intellectual practice!

Hillman

Hillman's interpretation of Hobbes's use of this passage is, I suspect, colored by the reference that Hobbes makes, in framing the quotation, to the "rights/liberties" of kings. Hillman seems to take this reference to imply that Hobbes thinks that kings would be *morally* entitled to act in the ways Samuel describes. But I believe that Hobbes's understanding of "rights" here is legal and institutional, not moral. That is, the activities cited in the passage are the things that the king will be able to do in the institutional setting that Hobbes believes will emerge from the social contract. These activities are things against which the people will have no legal recourse. Such an interpretation would be consistent, I think, with Hobbes's notion of "liberty". In the Hobbesian system, liberty is defined in terms of the absence of impediment of any kind (in a direct physicalist analogy to Newton, whom Hobbes so admired). Liberty so understood is for Hobbes a fact, not a norm. And, in his conception, only kings can have full enjoyment of that liberty. Everyone else is to be impeded by the law that the king imposes.

I myself am not enough of a scholar of Hobbes to offer authoritative commentary on Hobbes's notion of rights. But I strongly suspect that Hobbes means by the term something internal to his own intellectual scheme and that his reference to 'rights' might therefore have misled Hillman into thinking that Hobbes was offering a direct moral endorsement of the activities Samuel describes. I do not think that is so. Hobbes's normative argument is more indirect, more abstract and, as noted above, more 'economic' in style.

³For some thoughts on this issue see Brennan and Pettit (2005).

Samuel

The picture of the biblical attitude to kingship suggested by the 1 Samuel passage is itself more ambiguous than Hillman suggests. I now seek to indicate why.

When the leaders of the tribes first come to Samuel to ask for a king, Samuel is “displeased” (one translation has it “irritated”). But it is to be noted that this initial “irritation” is Samuel’s, not God’s: in verse 6, Samuel’s displeasure is registered *before* Samuel prays!

Samuel’s “irritation” here is not altogether surprising. Samuel is, at this point, the primary ‘judge’, an authority figure and the principal mediator between the people and God. Having a king will necessarily inhibit his influence—and the influence of the judges more broadly. Note too that part of the motivation for the people’s request lies in the inadequacies of Samuel’s sons—who Samuel himself had made judges (v. 1) but who, as the King James version has it, “... had turned aside after lucre” (v. 2). In their confrontation with Samuel, the elders of Israel point out that Samuel is old, that his sons are a disgrace, and that it was Samuel who appointed them! It is hardly to be wondered at if Samuel proves a trifle defensive!

But, as he has spent a lifetime doing, Samuel interrogates his initial reactions in the presence of God. And God’s response is extremely instructive. God’s first act is to soothe Samuel’s injured pride. “Don’t worry: they’re not rejecting *you*. They’re rejecting *me*!” says God. As, indeed, God points out, they have done before.

Then God addresses the substance of the matter. And on this, God is quite clear. Three times—once in v. 7; once in v. 9; and later in the second and final ‘conversation’ (v. 22)—God instructs Samuel to “*Hearken to the voice of the people!*” Specifically, in the immediate prelude to the portion Hobbes quotes, God instructs Samuel: “hearken to their voice; but ... show them the manner of the king that shall rule over them.” So Samuel does—(“Samuel told all the words of the Lord unto the people” v. 10); and so Hobbes reports, with the exception of the (contested) final sentence (v. 18).

Hillman makes much of that omission; but Hillman himself omits one final piece—and that piece is I think of some interest. Verse 18 (the last in Samuel’s speech and omitted entirely by Hobbes) reads, in its entirety:

“And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen for yourselves: *and the Lord will not hear you in that day.*” (v. 18) (my emphasis)

One can imagine Hobbes interpolating at this point: “and the Lord would be *right* not to listen!” Indeed Hobbes might well offer the argument that the Lord only stops his ears to the cries of his people when those cries demand something inappropriate. Why else, Hobbes might ask, *would* the Lord deliberately refuse to listen?⁴ Of course, to explore that latter question fully would require extended biblical exegesis—more extended than Hobbes was apparently disposed to offer (or I am equipped to provide).⁵ But there is a question here that seems entirely relevant: the court is out, I think, on how exactly this sentence, taken in its entirety, is best interpreted.

In any event, despite Samuel’s prediction about how the king will behave, and despite Samuel’s additional remark (v. 18), the people remain obdurate: “Nay, we shall have a king

⁴Stopping His ears is not to be confused with failing to intervene. God might refuse to act while at the same time “hearing the cries of His people” and suffering with them. That is, to refuse to hear the cries of His people goes beyond the fact of their suffering!

⁵Hillman himself may have omitted it for similar reason. I do not believe that Hillman was guilty of the kind of ‘deception’ that he accuses Hobbes of: my point is just that the inclusion of the extra phrase does somewhat color one’s interpretation of the sentence’s moral force.

over us!” (v. 19). Samuel reports all this to the Lord. And the Lord says once again to Samuel: “Hearken to their voice; and make them a king!”

And this, I can imagine Hobbes saying to Hillman, is the bottom line. Samuel’s job is done. He was to make sure that the “people” (or the “elders of Israel”—both references are used) were fully informed as to what having a king is likely to entail. After that, and given that the people *are* properly informed, the decision is theirs—whatever they decide is binding, and no further correspondence will be entered into! On this reading, the entire passage is quite hospitable to Hobbes’s purpose, and indeed to the whole social contract tradition. Seen in context, it is not clear that the inclusion of v. 18 really overturns anything that Hobbes argues, or would be likely to want to argue.

Hobbes and Samuel

Setting aside, for a moment, the issue of the interpretation of v. 18 and the scholarly legitimacy of Hobbes’s omitting it, there are some other features of this event that bear on Hobbes’s project.

In the first place, it is worth noting that the motives of the elders in having a king were more to provide public goods (defense as well as ‘government’) than to save the tribes from anarchy. The Israelites were in a fairly parlous state, to be sure. The Ark of the Covenant had already once been captured by the Philistines—and the dis-unified tribes were ill-equipped to defend themselves. But, as Hillman rightly notes, the tribes were not warring *amongst each other*.

Indeed, one might offer the stronger claim that the judges already constituted a “king” in the Hobbesian sense: there was already in place a system of law, a structure of interpretation and a recognized authority. And in fact, the reported episode is itself testimony to the existence of that authority: why else would the elders of Israel come to ask for Samuel’s permission in making institutional changes? In this respect, Hobbes is susceptible to a critique that seems to me to bite quite deep into his project—namely, that anarchy is not the only alternative to kingship and specifically not the alternative that was relevant in this case. And this reminds us that what is central to Hobbes’ logic is not monarchy as a particular institutional form so much as the existence of an ultimate *authority*, whatever precise form it takes.

In this connection, it is clear from the account that one feature of the people’s request especially aggrieves God.⁶ This is the desire to “have a king *like other nations*” (v. 5 and v. 20). To have a king is one thing: to have a king “just like everyone else” is another entirely. As the biblical narrative perceives it, the desire to “be like other nations” is a denial of Israel’s distinctive religious identity. The threat of religious and cultural ‘integration’ with the locals remains a recurrent trope throughout the Old Testament—and there is more than an element of that issue in this fragment.

As it turns out, however, Israel does not quite *get* a “king like other nations”. Samuel, the prophet/judge, is to choose the king and anoint him for his calling. And there will remain in Israel an ongoing tension between kingly power and prophetic influence—a tension that has been identified by some scholars (Acton 1877, perhaps most notably) as a critical precursor

⁶It is not clear that it aggrieves Samuel so much—as a close reading of v. 6 indicates. At least taking the text on its face, Samuel is concerned because the elders want a king; while God is concerned because they want a king *like other nations*.

to tensions between church and state in medieval Christendom and a central element in the foundation of modern liberty via the notion of the separation of powers.

And here there *is* a genuine tension between the biblical and Hobbesian conception of kingship. For Hobbes is no defender of the separation of powers in any form. Hobbes's argument is that the logic of sovereignty requires all power to be vested in a single authority, and ultimately a single will. And this involves, not least, the power to settle all disputes over matters of religion. Hobbes was arguably less influenced by the Civil War in England than his nationality and period would suggest; but he can hardly have been unaware of the role that religious differences could play in subverting the peace of the realm. Interestingly, it seems that Hobbes could not conceive of an equilibrium of forces (say between church and state) that did not sit on the cusp of perpetual instability. Unsurprisingly, therefore, 'complete' liberty (the situation of being unconstrained by the will of another) could belong only to the sovereign power, whoever that person happened to be and however the institutional details happened to be worked out.⁷

There is at issue here, of course, a more general question as to just how hospitable the biblical tradition is to political liberty—but that is a question that goes well beyond the scope of this brief comment. All we can offer here is the general remark that the biblical account is at least ambiguous on a matter—the singularity of sovereignty—on which Hobbes was totally clear.

Finally, we should not overlook the fact that there is at least one familiar public choice message on which Hobbes, Samuel and (if 1 Samuel is to be taken at face value) God, are all agreed: there ain't no such thing as a *benevolent* despot! Or better put, in any rational institutional design, you can't *rely* on despots being benevolent.

The whole point of Hobbes's argument is that a (non-benevolent) despot is, *despite the imperfections*, better than the alternative. The people of Israel thought that too, even when properly informed. And the most natural interpretation of this passage is that *God's* view (though perhaps not Samuel's) is that—in this matter of institutional choice, at least—the voice of the people, provided that they *are* properly informed, should prevail.

The Bottom Line

Hillman's critique of Hobbes's use of the passage from the Book of Samuel raises some interesting questions:

- Under what conditions does God “stop his ears” against the cries of his people?
- What exactly does Hobbes mean by the term “rights” and how does it connect if at all to his conception of “liberty”?
- Why can one not construe the situation of the Israelites under the judges as satisfying Hobbesian requirements for singular sovereignty?
- What, more generally, is the biblical understanding of, and attitude towards, political liberty?

It is as well to expose those questions—even though attempting to answer them goes well beyond the scope of this exchange.

⁷The picture is certainly complicated by the recognition that a truly rational prudential king might have good reason to pre-commit (and hence restrict his own power) if there are institutional technologies around that allow this to any extent. Just how despotic Hobbes' rational despot would turn out to be seems to be a contingent matter.

However, in relation to Hillman's central charge concerning Hobbes's scholarly integrity, I think that we have to offer a verdict of "not guilty". It seems clear to me that there is an interpretation of Hobbes that makes his focus on the central predictive aspect of Samuel's speech to the leaders of Israel both intelligible and proper. That interpretation is entirely consistent with Hobbes's omission of the final verse of Samuel's speech. And it is, incidentally, also consistent with seeing Hobbes as a natural precursor of public choice theory in two respects. First, he is to be seen as an exponent of a clear separation between positive and normative arguments. And second, he is revealed as an 'optimizer' rather than an idealist in his approach to normative questions! These are, I am inclined to think, intellectual accomplishments of no mean order.

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