

Democracy: Does the Bible Support It?
Rev. Dave Hunter
July 17, 2016

If you haven't been living in a cave, a cave without WiFi or TV, you know that this is a presidential election year; you know that the first of the two national party conventions starts tomorrow. And you're probably aware that Pennsylvania is a swing state, a battleground state. No, this will not be a political sermon this morning, but I thought it would be timely to inquire whether we can find support in the Bible for choosing our leaders through elections, support, in other words, for democracy. In case there's any doubt in your mind, I am in favor of democracy. But is the Bible? Is the Bible in favor of democracy? That's my question this morning.

The Bible, as I am sure you are well aware, is a very large collection of books, written over several centuries, in many different situations. My topic is clearly over-ambitious, but let's see what we can do with it in the short time we have together this morning.

If the Bible were concerned about democracy, you might find in it words like *democracy*, *elections*, *voting*, or *representation*. I checked, and they're not there.

Can we find any discussion of how leaders are chosen, or should be? Can we find any discussion of how trustworthy the people are? Yes, we can, though not much.

We'll start with Genesis, the story of Noah and the flood.

5 The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

6 ¶ And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

7 So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created--people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."

8 ¶ But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD. [Genesis 6:5-8]

No explanation for the wickedness of humankind, no attempt to redeem humanity, no explanation of how Noah avoided the wickedness of his generation.

Likewise, Genesis provides no explanation of why God chose Abraham to be the original ancestor of Israel. [Genesis 12:1-3]

God presumably chose Moses, on the other hand, because Moses had an impressive résumé, and because he passed the burning bush test. [Exodus chapters 2 and 3]

Moses, in the book of Exodus, has led the people out of Egypt and is leading them through the desert, on the way to the promised land. Moses, as the man in charge, is

2

overwhelmed by the responsibility of adjudicating over all the disputes that arise among the thousands of people under his charge. Jethro, his father-in-law, has some good advice for him:

21 . . . look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

22 Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. [Exodus 18:21-22]

A good plan, surely, but no elections involved, no role for the people in choosing their officers.

But later, the people are involved in a decision. The result is not a happy one.

1 ¶ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." [Exodus 32:1]

As a result, Aaron makes them a golden calf.

6 They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. [Exodus 32:6]

God and Moses are greatly displeased by this.

25 When Moses saw that the people were running wild . . .

26 . . . he stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered around him.

27 He said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.'"

28 The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. [Exodus 32:25-28]

Moses' response seems a bit excessive, doesn't it?

The Israelites, having arrived in Canaan, under the leadership of Joshua, who had been Moses' lieutenant and became his successor, relied on God to raise up judges to rescue them when their bad behavior led to military defeat. [Joshua, Judges]

Let's move forward quite a few years to the end of the era in which the prophet Samuel was leading Israel.

3

1 ¶ When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel.
3 Yet his sons did not follow in his 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, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."
6 But the thing displeased Samuel [and] Samuel prayed to the LORD,
7 and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen 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.
9 Now then, listen to their voice; only--you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."
11 Samuel 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;
15 He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.
16 He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work.
17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.
19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us,
20 so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." [1 Samuel 8:1, 3-7, 9, 11, 15-17, 19-20]

Here the people have a role, indeed, a decisive role in deciding their nation's political structure, but they did not choose elections, they did not choose democracy. They probably had never heard of those ideas.

The first king was Saul, chosen by God: "a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else." [1 Samuel 9:2] What a way to choose a leader! *We* do better than that, don't we?

But it gets worse: Saul becomes king through a sham lottery process. His selection was rigged. [1 Samuel 10:17-24]

Later, Samuel, again guided by God, chose David to be Saul's successor, when David was only a boy. [1 Samuel 16:3-13]

Let's move several hundred years forward, into the New Testament. How does Jesus choose his twelve disciples? Here's Mark's account:

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen.

17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. [Mark 1:16-20]

Did Jesus already know these two sets of brothers? Mark doesn't say.

The selection of Matthew, also known as Levi, is also unexplained:

14 As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And Levi got up and followed him. [Mark 2:14 // Matthew 9:9]

How the other seven were recruited is not even mentioned. [Matthew 10:1-4]

While there was no popular participation in Jesus' selection of his disciples, the situation is different at the end of Jesus' life. It provides a most unhappy example. Jesus has been arrested, and Pilate, following the apparent custom during the festival, consults the people about which prisoner should be released, Jesus or Barrabas. The people choose Barrabas, leaving Jesus to be crucified. It is noteworthy that Mark and Matthew use for "people" the word *ochlos*, which refers to a mob or rabble, while Luke uses *laos*, a nonpejorative term for people. [Mark 15:6-15, Matthew 27:15-26, Luke 23:13-25]

A much different example comes from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Luke, the presumed author, describes the early Christian community in Jerusalem. The Apostles feel overworked.

2 And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.

3 Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task,

4 while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

5 What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, [and six others.] [Acts 6:2-5]

Here we have a hint of the possibility that a democratic procedure could develop.

But, if I may digress very briefly, in another respect, I find the Acts community most unsatisfactory. First, it supports itself financially by requiring newcomers to sell their property and donate the proceeds to the community. They are thus dependent on a steady stream of newcomers. It's not an economically sustainable arrangement. [Acts 4] Secondly, when a

newcomer withholds a portion of the proceeds from his sale, he is summarily executed, his wife, too. [Acts 5]

I think it is safe to conclude that democracy was neither practiced nor advocated by either the ancient Israelites or by Jesus and his followers.

* * *

OFFERING

Next we need to ask whether the values proclaimed in the Bible are values that you would expect to lead, in due course, to democratic institutions.

We start, not surprisingly, with Genesis, chapter 1: “So God created humankind in God’s image.” [Genesis 1:27] Anyone created in God’s image is surely worthy to participate in the selection of leaders.

Now jump ahead to King David, and recall the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah the Hittite. David, the king, rapes Bathsheba, then has her husband, Uriah, killed, and then marries the widow. But the prophet Nathan does not let David get away with his crime, at least not totally, establishing the democratic principle that the king – or the president – is not above the law. [2 Samuel 11, 12:1-18]

Likewise, King Ahab and his wife Jezebel have their neighbor, Naboth, killed, so that they can acquire his vineyard for a vegetable garden. Divine justice terminates their lives. The King is not above the law. [1 Kings 21]

Next a quick look at three or four of the prophets. I’m sure you’ll recognize the familiar words of the prophet Amos, speaking on behalf of God:

21 ¶ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.
 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.
 [Amos 5:21-24]

And here are the equally familiar words of the prophet Micah:

6 ¶ "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

6

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? [Micah 6:6-8]

The prophet Isaiah spoke on behalf of God, denouncing social injustice.

5:8 ¶ Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!

9 The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. [Isaiah 5:8-9]

An anonymous later prophet, his words found with those of Isaiah, preached the good news of deliverance:

61:1 ¶ The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [Isaiah 61:1-2]

What system of government is most consistent with these teachings? There can be only one: democracy.

Does Jesus say anything that would contradict this conclusion? I don't think so, but let's take a look at the New Testament gospels.

When Mary learns that she is to have a baby, she visits her cousin Elizabeth and, as reported by Luke, she says, in recognition of what God has done:

51 The Mighty One has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. [Luke 1:50-53]

And who comes to visit Joseph and Mary and the new baby Jesus, according to Luke? It's shepherds. Shepherds, at that time and in that place, are at the bottom of the social order. Yet Luke places shepherds there with Jesus and his parents. A clear and creative way to signal the acceptance of democratic principles.

Later, Jesus, the adult teacher, tells us of an attempt to fill the places at a dinner party:

'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' [Luke 14:21]

Another example of the acceptance of democratic principles.

One more passage from Luke:

25 ¶ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 [Jesus] said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

27 [The lawyer] answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

28 And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." [Luke 10:25-28]

If you love your neighbor as yourself, surely you will want your neighbor as well as yourself to have the right to vote.

Matthew likewise provides support for democratic principles. Here are two examples.

First:

43 ¶ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you [Matthew 5:43-44]

And second:

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' [Matthew 25:34-40]

That's pretty clear, don't you think?

* * *

But it's not as easy as that. Let me raise three problems for you to consider.

(1) First, a society's values can hardly provide a solid foundation for democracy if that society accepts slavery, or if women are second class citizens. The world of the Bible had both afflictions. Consider Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah was unable to get pregnant – in the Bible infertility is always the woman's fault – she offers Abraham her slave girl, Hagar. He accepts, apparently with no hesitation. [Genesis 16:1-4]

Did either of them consult Hagar about this arrangement? Of course not.

Eventually, as you know, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. While Isaac was still a boy, Abraham had another visit from God.

1 ¶ After these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And Abraham said, "Here I am."

2 God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." [Genesis 22:1-2]

Now if you – I'm speaking to the fathers among you – received such a request from God, would you discuss the situation with your wife before setting off for the land of Moriah? Abe did not.

Switching Testaments, you might ask yourself why all of Jesus's disciples were men, [Matthew 10:1-4] although his women followers appear to have been paying the bills.

Here's how Luke describes the arrangement:

1 ¶ Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,

2 as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,

3 and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. [Luke 8:1-3]

And that dinner party I mentioned a minute ago – who delivered the invitations? The master's slave. [Luke 14:17, 21]

But do male privilege and slavery prevent a nation from being a democracy? Let us recall that slavery was not abolished in the United States until 1865, and its effects are still with us 151

years later, as we have been forcefully reminded this month. Women did not gain the vote until 1919, less than a hundred years ago, and sexism still persists today. Ours is a flawed democracy, an unfinished democracy.

(2) Second problem. You could accuse me of cherry picking the passages that support my thesis. The Bible is very thick. Not everything is entirely attractive. What gives one passage more authority than another? Here's a passage from Deuteronomy that you probably don't hear very often:

18 ¶ If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him,
 19 then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place.
 20 They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard."
 21 Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid. [Deuteronomy 21:18-21]

Does that passage from Deuteronomy have equal status to this one from the Gospels?

Do to others as you would have them do to you. [Luke 6:31 // Matthew 7:12]

Do we find our moral values in the Bible? Or do we evaluate what we read in the Bible on the basis of the moral values we bring to the Bible? The short answers to those questions are "yes" and "yes." I suggest you consider a longer, more thoughtful, response.

(3) Third problem: A prerequisite for successful democracy is a well educated and well informed electorate. Certainly we want everyone to be able to read and write, but we would hope that they can go far beyond that. We should all have a basic understanding of the scientific method, and that understanding, with appropriate instruction, should have led us to accept the theory of evolution, the reality of the threat of global warming, and the arbitrariness of declaring when life begins (or ends). A good education will teach students how to use reason, and will teach them the value of reason and intellectual curiosity. A good education will teach them how to distinguish science from propaganda. In short, a good education is necessary for a responsible evaluation of candidates for public office and of political parties and their platforms.

What does the Bible say about education? I searched the Bible from front to back for the words *school*, *schools*, *educate*, *education*, and *student* – no results.

* * *

Where do I come out on all this?

There is nothing in the Bible that directly and explicitly addresses the question of democracy. We can find passages that would appear to be supportive of democracy, but we can find other passages that might lead us to hesitate before claiming that the Bible supports democracy. It seems to me that if you combine the human experience and wisdom described in the Bible with the experience and wisdom of the past two thousand years, you come out in favor of democracy.

If you think of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus as a kingdom to be created in this world, then I would characterize the Kingdom of God as a constitutional monarchy, a constitutional monarchy based on democratic principles, a kingdom which we might call the beloved community or the realm of peace and justice, a kingdom the creation and maintenance of which is up to us, us humans. May it be so. Amen.