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Kingdom impact in every sphere of society from a Christian research perspective

Your topic "Research that Guides Kingdom Impact: Kingdom impact in every sphere of society" can contain biblical content with specific cultural/social/structural applications. Feel free to make application to the Church in Africa and also do draw examples and make recommendations more broadly. You can refer to your own experiences as well as to those of your students. Your plenary address should take between 30-45 minutes. It will be followed by a brief prayer and then 15 minutes of discussion.

Scripture Reading

“This is what the King who will reign over you will claim as his rights. He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots, horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be his commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, others will plow his ground and reap his harvest, others will make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give them to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day. But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king to over us. They we will be like other nations, with a king to lead us, and to go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8: 10-20).

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Introduction

In the last general election in Kenya, the opposition party leader, Raila Odinga told his followers he was going to lead them from Egypt to Canaan. You have to admire Raila's genius in recognizing how African societies resonate with biblical stories. But it was the wrong metaphor, because it was used sixty years ago by freedom fighters against colonial oppression. Raila was unconsciously looking for a biblical vocabulary of nation-hood formation. Or his case as an opposition leader, a vocabulary of the failures of the nation-state, which he could use to critique of the existing government and his rival, Uhuru Kenyatta.

In this presentation, I wish to propose that for Christianity in Africa to become relevant to the many challenges facing African nations and to inspire transformation, the biggest need is for us empower our research, thinking, and scholarship with a biblical vocabulary. For that, our theological scholarship about politics, economics, education, media and especially the middle-class needs to reenter into a robust engagement with the whole biblical cannon. My presentation cannot go into that vocabulary—this is a long-term research goal. But I hope I can get us to recognize that the processes of nation formation in Africa are not themselves new, in which case, the bible remains relevant to out often confusing world.

The first generation of African bible readers immediately understood how close Genesis was to the African soil and soul; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob as key ancestors, Canaan as a bounded geographic territory which the descendants could claim as their own, and intimate (if embarrassing) family stories, rituals, symbols such as stones pillars, property such as goats and sheep, patterns of hospitality, conflict with neighboring tribes, people movement such as migration to Egypt to escape drought or search for water, all these resonated with the African world when the bible was first translated. The second generation of African bible readers—the first educated generation, which fought for independence, recognized the narratives from Exodus to Joshua to inspire the fight for independence. There was a third recognition by cultural theologians in the post-independent decades, which gave us cultural theology.

In the in the late 20th century and early 21st century, African Christianity has an opportunity to offer leadership in another phase of encounter between the Bible and the African world. However, our scholarship seems to have lost sight of the significance of the biblical narrative that first inspired the Christian faith to take root in Africa. Much recent scholarship is shaped by primary questions informed by cultural and critical perspectives from the West; these questions largely leave the biblical narrative in the margins. We need to align our memory, and experience, with the memory and experience of Israel as it comes down to us in the Bible.

Samuel's warning

In order to make my case of the fresh significance of the bible, I am going to focus on what is going on in 1 Samuel 2: 1-8. In this passage, Samuel is reading “the riot act” (that is, issuing a severe warning) to Israel. They have just requested him for a king; he can see the consequences, and he is afraid the burden may be too much. But Israel is having none of that. They want a king, a king they will have. But how did they get here?

By the time we meet Samuel, a character straight out of the book of Judges, Israel has settled in Canaan some 400 years, with a genealogical sense of kinship anchored in the memory of Jacob as a common ancestor, but the groups are not tightly organized. Under a “charismatic leader”, that is, a “man of the moment”, they often join to fight a common enemy and then scatter to their territories. They also have intra-territorial disputes. Life is organized around the dynamics that we find in the book of Ruth: a subsistence economy shaped by planting and harvesting cycles, each person does what is right in their own eyes in syncretistic worship influenced by gods of their neighbors.

Enter Samuel as a judge shuttling between Mizpah, Bethel and Gilgal (1 Samuel 7). When he is old he appoints his sons as judges and turn corrupt, the elders of Israel insist on a king, “Like all other nations. Our king will judge us and lead us and fight our battles” (1 Sam 8: 5).

Samuel is shocked by their request. We know that Israel is vulnerable to their neighbors, especially the Philistines, so we think Samuel should not be shocked at the request for a king.

But, take a long-range view of this passage. It is likely that the confrontation between Samuel and Israel in 1 Sam 8, is recorded in later, after Israel begins to come to terms with the costs of having a king. Imagine, for instance somewhere after 2 Sam 3, when Saul dies, Abner allies himself with David and sets in motion a plan to transfer Israel to David (2 Sam3:1-19). The plot twists when Joab, commander of David’s armies, kills Abner in a personal vendetta, and Ishbosheth, Saul’s son and heir to his throne is murdered (2 Samuel 4). David is anointed king of all Israel. After the anointing comes a passing passage, so small you almost miss its significance, in 2 Samuel 5: 7-10 “*David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David...and built the city all around from the Milo inward*”.

Transition from tribes to an organized society

It is easy to miss that passage because we romanticize the idea of the city of David. But it is from here that the organizational life of Israel drastically changes course. Think of Jerusalem not as large metropolitan city of today, but as one of those grainy photographs of new towns budding into cities in Africa about a hundred years ago, and they how they quickly grow in a matter of decades, and how people migrate from far and wide in rural places, to make life at the city, and all the positive and negative changes.

To move previously nomadic or peasant groups out of rural agricultural towns like Bethlehem (Naomi’s town) into these centralized, congested locations, imagine labor intensive construction work, rough food kiosks, poorly constructed but congested houses, a band of bush warriors now called an army. They need resources; they need young women to leave their sheltered homes to come and cook and clean and be concubines of the men. As this experiment grows into taxes, conscripted labor, organized bureaucracy and eventually a ruling class, you can hear Samuel saying, “I told you so”

1 Samuel 8: 10-20:

“This is what the King who will reign over you will claim as his rights. He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots, horses, and they will run in front of his chariots.

(that is referring to accumulation of state machinery). Some he will assign to be his commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties (state organizational bureaucracy), others will plow his ground and reap his harvest, others will make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots (conscripted labor, eventually a merchant class). He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers (women will be taken away from the protection of their families). He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants (you have to pay taxes). He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give them to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use (the civil service class, which grows into a middleclass). He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves.

Then comes this penitent line: *When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you. But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king to over us. They we will be like other nations, with a king to lead us, and to go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8: 10-20).*

Once you read this passage from this larger structural perspective, the disruptive nature of the change-over from tribes into national identity becomes apparent.

The first transition is the social evolution involved out of a primary tribal identity into a national identity under a united bureaucracy. For Israel this took a long time. Moses gave Israelites the law (a constitution) Joshua gave them a territory, Saul inaugurated the monarchy, and David moves the monarchy towards centralized nationhood, by creating the first urban center in Israel, Jerusalem “the city of David”. From a central command, he David builds a strong identity for the tribes, subdues neighboring enemies like Edom, Moab, Amon, Philistia, arranges regional peace alliances with Phoenicia and Syria. Clearly, David is very successful in his nationalizing goals, which is why he becomes the greatest example of the ideal King for Israel... his should be the subject of further scholarship to help us engage with our political leaders...but my goal tonight is to help us see the impact of the transitions.

With the coming of a national consciousness in Israel is the *second transition*—introduction of a government that would grow into a bureaucracy. That little text on David making Jerusalem his capital is the first hint you get of a class that must depend on the majority peasant rural population. After that 1 Samuel 8 text makes sense: *He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots, horses, and they will run in front of his chariots.* What? Pull young men (for it is always young men) from villages into the city, enforce contributions of grain to feed them. Which regions contribute more, and what right does the city have to take these? The text goes on. *He will assign some to be his commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties (organizational bureaucracy);* of course, that means some will be more senior than others. Who determines the top positions, and how dare David give the best positions to the men of Judah, to his relatives (the sons of Zeruah)—tribalism and nepotism, anyone? *He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants.* Taxes. What right does this imposter up in the hill (colonial governors mansions, which became statehouses were first

situated on hilltops) have to take our hard-earned sweat to pay bloated salaries to a bunch of idle army generals!

However primitive you might read the conditions of the city of Jerusalem, as an African of the 20th century you intuitively see how the reorganization disrupts hitherto trusted ways of life, especially family and means of production. Leadership moves from local charismatically gifted opportunities (Like Samson or Deborah or Gideon) to national (social) bureaucracies that need tax and new arrangements of labor to sustain. Soon they discovered (as we are with constitutional democracy in Africa), that while the social consciousness was necessary (and in fact other nations were organizing similar ways under the emerging technology of the iron age), the system was a heavy burden. For a society in which the primary identity was tribal, organization and administration of a government and a city, the power and authority of kingship, the institutions around the king means that someone from outside “our tribe” is ruling us; tribalism is why it takes seven years after the death of Saul, before David becomes King of all Israel. In the decades after we gained independence in Africa, these have been our struggles.

And that is the *third transition*, which again is gradual, and whose effects only make sense later: the normalization of class structures which starts out with good intentions—a ruling and educated elite, but soon where you have a very wealthy few at the top and poor classes struggling in widespread poverty, injustice and negative impact on family and communal life. In time, in Israel as in Africa, there is a gradual transition from primarily depending on the land for food crop, to a trade economy that mostly benefits the ruling class. Civil service bureaucracy as part of the economic engine also grows massive. We get an idea how bad this was some 80 years later, after the death of Solomon, when young Rehoboam boasts in 2 Kings 12: 14, “*My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke...I will discipline you with scorpions*”. In other words, the tax and forced labor burden behind the apparent prosperity of the united monarchy from the time of David through Solomon devastates rural territories and impoverishes the majority. For instance, Solomon had conscripted 150,000 men to build the temple. As we read of Israel breaking into two, we are not surprised that Africa, when the immediate post independent class assumed leadership, most of them started out with grand dreams to develop the nations. But since they were ill-prepared to run the system, they turned to patrimonialism, which when combined with the colonial system, bred the dysfunctions of war, corruption and endemic poverty.

In Africa, these changes out of tribal identities have happened very fast. Prior to colonial era, majority of African societies organized like old Israel, around seasons and needs of small communities—people know each other and apply a generalized custom to property and family life, everyone has their place. For Africa the major difference in this social evolution has taken place very fast because of additional political, economic, technological and cultural globalization processes. Whereas Israel had its God-given constitution (the law), African countries have not had a common reference point for economic and sociocultural arrangements. As we negotiate our way through the traditional, modern urban, and globalizing worlds, we in Africa have tried to follow the western rational-scientific worldview which is confused in its liberal and conservative visions, and competing Marxist and capitalist claims. Thus, Africa is caught in a kind of socio-

cognitive dissonance, rooted in attempts to cope with the simultaneous worldviews supplied by all these worlds. In a state of dissonance, psychologists tell us that disequilibrium is expressed in ways that make the individual dysfunctional in normal society. Africa's many crises—such as the inability to streamline political power for the common good, the impoverishment of an otherwise resource-rich continent, and the proliferation of violence, and radicalization of the youth—are reflections of structural worldview dissonance.

Trade and the rise of a “middle class”

In Israel, as in Africa, *with time (and it is necessary to emphasize that transitions take time)*, the bureaucratic structures, where a significant part of the population is employed to run the nation (as army or cooks or clerks or builders) becomes a massive economic engine, which then needs new sources of money to sustain—the economy turns to trade. From a purely geographical perspective, have you ever wondered why Assyrians, Babylonians and Egyptians attacked the little nation of Israel? It doesn't make sense, until you realize that Israel occupied strategic territory. David's kingship had ended the Philistine threat and opened trade routes from the sea with Phoenicians, overland camel caravans transporting various goods from southern Arabia and Ethiopia and the Far East and the North West. Israel is a nation of strategic military importance for the control of trade routes for other large nations.

Here is the part we barely see coming both in Israel and in Africa: the civil service bureaucracy and the trading class start to form what is tantamount to a “middle class”: that is, a significant part of the population is dependent on wage income or trade networks. Once there is a middleclass, the children, the next generation, have time for leisure, exposure to new ideas, and demographic distinctions across age grades and class distinctions of the propertied and the poor, ruler and ruled. From this angle, a great deal of the events during Solomon's reign make sense. The abundance of chariots and horsemen, silver and gold as plentiful as stones, abundance of cedars as sycamore in the lowlands, the visit of the queen of Sheba, and all the wise men that came to banter with Solomon, his having 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Here is another development: with a trading economy also, based on outside networks, plural ideas about worship and spirituality are properly introduced into Israel. Think about it. That is what idolatry was, the multiplicity of religious worldviews influencing social life. The logical consequence of this cosmological environment is gods and idols to which Israel feels obliged to pay homage to keep the money flowing; and unlike before where there was little monetary value to idolatry, once an economic value is attached to foreign (global), it is very hard to retain exclusive monotheism, and from there is series of generational cycles of decline and renewal.

If I had time could go on to explore the kings for these patterns of transition due to shifting bureaucracies, trade, external (global) influences and their relation to worship of Yahweh. My purpose of this essay is to challenge our scholarship in Africa to revisit the bible and expand our imagination to reflect how the politics, economics, and sociocultural developments and global influences can be reread through the lens an expanded view of the Old Testament Israel.

Our theology has grown thin because we are mostly focused on a narrow application of selected parts of the bible that focus on one final solution, the assumption that once everybody is

saved—believes in God—and behaves morally, all will be well with our nations. It is not working. Looking back at the passage we read in 1 Samuel 8, there is something poignant about Samuel’s warnings to the young Israelite nation. *“Your choice for a king sets in motion events with unintended consequences. You have requested a king. A king you will get. Yes, the system will work, but beware that dysfunction is embedded in the institution of kingship.”*

Don’t get me wrong, a national identity has its advantages and strengths. In this essay, my larger point is that how things unfold in the post-David Era Israel is a preview of how things unfold in every society that moves from its kinship or tribal or feudal identity to largescale social organization, with laws and ideology intended to bring many ethnic groups into a single allegiance under a central leadership. With shifting power arrangements, disruption or dysfunction is inevitable. Intergroup conflict with apparent loss of life does not come as a surprise to the biblical text; the bible does not try to cover it up. Dysfunction is embedded in all of our human institutions, perhaps because of the Fall (another major theme we need to explore from an African perspective). And since no society is an island, pluralism introduced by trade networks and the media is inevitable, and these throw local cultures into cultural dissonance. The problems of Africa during the century long transitional processes out of tribes into multi-ethnic nations, are therefore not unique of themselves. Scholars like Emmanuel Katongole and Patrick Chabal have effectively argued what Samuel told Israel: *yes, you can have a king as you wish and be like other nations, but be aware that dysfunction is embedded in the modern nation state. Africa is not an anomaly in world politics; it works very well in the logic of nation-state formation processes.*

But if this suggests a dilemma, it also suggests a powerful trope of grace, but not the grace in the way we have narrowly imagined it. If dysfunction is embedded in the nations, we need a different way to think theologically. We have no cut and paste proposals—final solutions—of how we transform all sectors of society in our nations. The bible does not really offer clear cut answers; Jesus for instance takes for granted that Caesar will always want tax and that tax collectors will probably cheat; “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”; or that things will go terribly wrong in whole regions: “there will be wars and rumors of war”, he tells his disciples; “let those who are alive flee to the mountains...”. Paul, likewise, takes the institution of government with all its problems for granted, and advises, “Submit to the governing authorities...”

What we do have is a dynamic bible “The Living Word, alive and active, sharper than a double-edged sword” that is able to come alive in every new generation in spite of the problems, and like streams in the desert, to resource renewal at the individual, communal and national levels. And that is the point. The bible with or without our problems, can come alive. As Andrew Walls has insisted, African Christianity’s maturing self-consciousness provides a fresh context for a lively engagement between the biblical text and newly emergent issues in relatively new nations. That is the task at hand.

At this stage of Christianity in Africa, the task of renewed engagement with scripture lies with thought leaders. Pastors already do their part, but they are first and foremost pastors. Theologians are the thought leaders. When Israel moved towards a centralized bureaucracy, God raised prophets to give question and shape the values of the forming nation. Prophets were not

merely charismatic poets. They were not an institution, like the temple, or appointed, like priests. They had no inherent political or priestly power of their own, and they were not compensated (no economic power), and because of their prophecies, they were often under threat. Yet, in the centralized society, the prophets the comprehensive teachers: they looked into the past, into history of God's dealings with Israel and kept that memory alive; they explored the world beyond Israel—just try reading Jeremiah or Isaiah in a single seating and you'll see they are not merely “preachers”; they were worldview researchers. And very importantly, they looked compassionately at daily lives of ordinary people and rebuked the rulers for oppressing the poor— spoke truth to power to rehabilitate the political system; try the minor prophets for that. Prophets were historians, researchers, writers, educators, intellectuals, their primary business was to see and communicate everything as faithful representatives of Yahweh.

In “Research Writ Large” I know there is a place for the social sciences (sociology, anthropology [missiology] and psychology, a discussion for another day) because I've done plenty of it these several years. But after spending time out in the west, I have grown increasingly worried that if we do not reintroduce and weave the whole biblical narrative (which Africa intuitively gets) into our quest for educated solutions, we have lost the battle to shape the next generations with a biblical worldview, and we really cannot resource theological education. We will simply be competing with secular institutions, and boy, are they mean at what they do to religion. If we are missiologists/ scholars of world Christianity, no matter how highly trained we are in other disciplines, the bible remains our primary business.

If we reread the biblical cannon in its bigger perspectives (not just simplistic proof-text or devotional passages), we will broaden our society's understanding our how God is at work in the world and expand beyond the salvation “solution” that we (evangelicals) have settled for. Yes, everyone is in need of forgiveness through the cross of Christ, but the word of God has so much more life for our nations. That *awareness* of how the biblical cannon speaks to the present moment—and I have argued that the present nation-formation processes align with the Saul-David-Solomon continuum, a period of about 120 years (I would argue the struggles of west reflect in the later phases of the downward spiral under the kings) is critical. We also need to see things in generational perspective, so that we can inspire not just individual transformation but long-term structural change of state, civil society, the capitalistic market, technology and mass media, and the emerging middle-class demographic in long-term view. Nothing is really new under the sun; it has all been done before, and God's word is large enough to speak to our worlds as it spoke those many millennia and centuries ago.

As scholars, reembracing the biblical cannon for our contemporary societies is how we will make Christianity relevant to Africa. It is how we will resource theological education with new ideas, and it is how we will inspire new generations to embrace the bible narratives as their own.

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