

WORK IN PROGRESS: LEADERSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

BY IAN PARKINSON

If your experience has been anything like mine, I imagine that the majority of sermons and other talks you have heard (and even delivered) on Christian leadership have had Old Testament characters as their subjects.

On one level, this is completely understandable. The OT is packed with great stories of fascinating leaders, many with somewhat chequered careers and colourful lives, who were used by God in the furtherance of his purposes. If nothing else, these stories draw our attention to the ways in which God calls people, often very unlikely people, raises them up, and equips them to accomplish things far beyond that which might have been possible through the deployment of their own natural abilities. They are stories which bring hope to those of us who are all too familiar with our own personal limitations. However, as a commentary on Christian leadership, all of these OT stories are to an extent provisional and incomplete. If these are the only biblical texts we draw on to inform our understanding of Christian leadership, we will end up with a limited and, ultimately, flawed understanding of the kind of leadership God has in mind to be exercised amongst his people.

PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S LEADERSHIP

As is the case with so many other things, the picture the OT presents of leadership is painted with broad brush strokes. It sets out some of the aims and purposes of leadership within God's economy, without arriving at a full picture of the ways in which this leadership will be expressed.

At its most basic, human leadership is established by God as an expression of and participation in his leadership over creation. Within the creation narratives themselves comes the express instruction to humankind to be stewards over the created order on God's behalf. This notion of leadership as stewardship is reflected in one of the titles given to the very earliest group of leaders in the OT, that of judge.

Judges were concerned with the establishment or maintenance of justice which, in Israel, was seen not simply as conformity to an impersonal moral standard, but rather in more relational terms as the right



ordering of society according to God's values and in order that God's peace (shalom) might be established. Responsibility for seeing such order established involved judges in a range of possible actions including ruling, delivering the community from danger, coming to the aid of those suffering injustice, championing the cause of the needy and disadvantaged, and ensuring the material and spiritual well being of the community. The judge's role is thus a clear reflection of the role which God exercises over the earth and in particular over his covenant people, is performed as an extension of this role, and is an anticipation of the ministry to be performed by God's future messianic ruler. Leadership from the outset is thus seen as a participation in the work of God, at the initiative of God and in a manner which is in accord with his aims and values. One of the key distinctives, thus, of Christian leadership is that it is to be conceived of as contingent upon, delegated by, and submitted to God who is the true leader.

SERVANT OF THE LORD

Perhaps the most significant OT word for leader is that of servant. A richly nuanced term, connoting both those occupying the lowest social status, and also those enjoying the highest possible privilege (that of being God's servant) it is the OT leadership motif which is above all taken up by the NT writers. For the Christian leader, servanthood signals the importance of obedience to God and of submission to his will. David is idealised as the model servant who kept God's commands, and followed God with all of his heart, doing only that which was right in God's sight, whilst Caleb is differentiated from his peers as a servant who has followed God fully. Effective Christian leaders are always followers first and never lose their commitment to discerning and pursuing God's will rather than their own. Such service is a duty but equally an immense privilege and our obedience is a joyful response to this grace which has been extended to us. More than that, servants of the Lord have a clear dependence upon God leading to a proper expectation that God himself will resource them and act on their behalf. So, Elijah sees his servant status and his obedience as grounds for expecting God to vindicate him before the prophets of Baal.

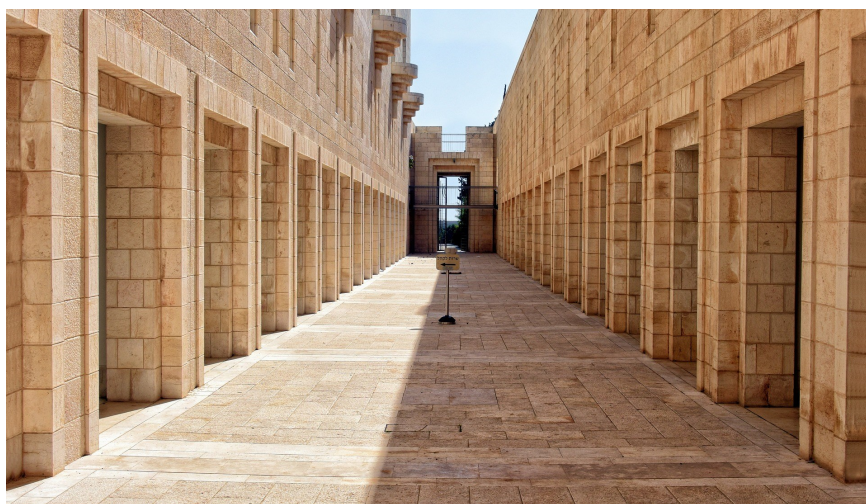
Being a servant of the Lord may well imply occupying a privileged and honoured place. However, this is never seen as grounds for using such privilege for our own advantage. Rather, servanthood

also highlights our calling to serve others and to enable their own legitimate interests to be furthered. As Walter Wright observes:

'Leadership is for lovers of people. Servant leadership is about a relationship with God that so shapes who we are that people see in us a person of character and commitment whose influence they choose to follow... Servant leadership is community directed and uses its power not for selfish ends but for growth of those who are being led and the accomplishment of the shared mission of the community'.

A PROVISIONAL ARRANGEMENT

If the objectives and purposes of leadership as presented in the OT are timeless, the ways in which this leadership is exercised are, however, provisional. This is why we must be circumspect about basing our own leadership practice on that modelled in the OT. Leadership in the OT tends to be a solo activity, exercised by heroic individuals for the benefit of (relatively passive) others. However, the OT itself anticipates a coming, future era in which its own existing leadership forms will be, to an extent at least, superseded by a more dispersed form of leadership. Some of the exilic prophets speak of a coming age in which the experience of being equipped by God's Spirit, thus far the province of the select few, will be extended to the entire community of faith. The consequence of this will be that the knowledge of God, which has previously been mediated to the community by the anointed leader, will be dispersed widely throughout the whole community who will share in a common and direct knowledge of God. Now there will no longer be a requirement for special teachers for they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. The leadership tasks associated with particular individuals are now shared by the whole people. The anointed individual has given way to the



anointed community. Leadership is, at least to an extent, now more widely dispersed amongst the entire community, even amongst those who previously, for social or economic reasons, may have been excluded.

OT leadership may be biblical but it is not completely Christian. The leader in the NT is concerned in the same way for God's purposes to be accomplished but has a different understanding of the ways in which this might take place. Rather than possessing sole responsibility for exercising God's leadership on God's behalf, the NT leader sees themselves far more as one who enables and encourages the leadership of the Spirit to be expressed through the inter-relationship of every member of the body of Christ. The OT proclamation of 'thus says the Lord', has now given way to the NT statement that 'it seems good to the Holy Spirit, and to us'.



FOR REFLECTION

1. To what extent is my own understanding of leadership shaped by a provisional, Old Testament paradigm, as opposed to that presented in the NT?
2. How is my own leadership practice informed by an understanding that I am called firstly to be a 'servant of the Lord'? How might this understanding challenge and reshape some of my current leadership attitudes and practices?
3. How might I exercise my leadership in such a way as to facilitate further the leadership of the Spirit amongst the whole congregation whom I serve?

