

On the Significance of Theocracy (Direct Rule of God) in the Thought of Martin Buber: *The Kingship of God* and Utopian Social Thought as Seen in Buber's Interpretation of the Book of Judges

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Abstract

After the Exodus, Yahweh and the Israelites entered into the Sinai Covenant, which established their relationship as that between the 'God who guides' and the 'people who follow'. Based on this direct relationship between God and the people, a loose federation of tribal communities was built as a system of sovereignty during the period of Judges, in which charismatic rule was exercised by human leaders who were delegated limited power by God from time to time. The *direct rule of God* means, in substance, rule by human leaders who were given limited power by God. This is an important point that characterizes the period of Judges that precedes the period of the Kingdom. What Buber sought for his contemporary society is an economic system that can provide an organic linkage among different kinds of vocations and that can strike the right balance between production and consumption. In other words, it is a federate society with less top-down control and more voluntary interactions among village communities and guild society. Buber, who embraced the idea of utopian social justice, aspired for such a society and worked for its realization. Definitely, this view of Buber stems from his understanding of theocracy as depicted in the Hebrew Bible.

Keywords: Martin Buber, theocracy, charismatic rule, utopian society, federation of communities

Introduction : Purpose of this Paper and Direction of Discussion

This paper¹⁾ deals with *The Kingship of God* (*Königtum Gottes*,²⁾ 1932) authored by Martin Buber, focusing on the 'direct rule of God' and 'theocracy' (*Theokratie*)—the main themes of this work. In doing so, I aim to shed light on the essential substance of these concepts and consider how they are associated with Buber's thought.

The Kingship of God, positioned as one of Buber's biblical works, is contained in the second volume of the *Collected Works of Martin Buber*, published in 1964. Accordingly, this work has

been treated as one of Buber's hermeneutic works in the chronological study of Buber's achievements, and has often been referred to by Old Testament scholars as a source that shows Buber's interpretation of the Book of Judges. This work in itself was written to express the author's criticism of Wellhausen's documentary analysis, while Buber's interpretation of the Book of Judges was later criticized by Ludwig Köhler, Wilhelm Caspari, Walter Baumgartner, Gerhard von Rad, V. Jecheskel Kaufmann, Elias Auerbach, Albrecht Alt, and others.³⁾ More recently, Dennis T. Olson wrote a paper focusing exclusively on *The Kingship of God*, which is contained in a collection of his biblical papers.⁴⁾ In short, *The Kingship of God* is characterized by its focus on different interpretations of the Book of Judges among Old Testament scholars and has never been considered to represent the thought of Buber itself. This is because the conventional study of Buber's philosophical thought has been directed to the origin of his dialogical thought discussed in his *I and Thou* (1923) and its relationship with mysticism, and also to possible applications of this dialogical thought for religious, social, educational, and psychotherapeutic purposes. Separate from the development of such dialogical thought from its origin to applications, focus has been also placed on Buber's translation and study of Hasidism literature, involvement in the Zionism movement, biblical study, and Hebrew Bible translation. Accordingly, in the conventional study of Buber's thought, *The Kingship of God* has been considered as one of his hermeneutic works of Bible, and little attention has been paid to the possible influence of this work on Buber's philosophical thought. For this reason, *The Kingship of God* is deemed not to be worthy of serious consideration by scholars of Buber's thought.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to demonstrate that *The Kingship of God* that discusses Buber's interpretation of the Bible had a significant influence on the development of social thought within this thinker, and that, by the concepts of 'direct rule of God' and 'theocracy', Buber, in substance, meant his idealistic utopian society. By proving that these concepts connected Buber's hermeneutic study with his social thought, I hope to make some meaningful contribution to the study of Buber's thought.

Preface: Background to the Writing of *The Kingship of God* and the Purpose of This Work

When completing the translation of the first ten books of the Hebrew Bible in the later 1920s, Martin Buber (1878–1965) communicated to Rosenzweig his decision to write a theological interpretation of the Bible as part of his achievements of his biblical work.⁵⁾ In those days, the topic that was the most important for him and that had fully matured within himself was the question of the 'origin of messianism in Israel'.⁶⁾ When he set about exploring this topic, he had a plan to write a three-volume work under the theme, "The Coming One: Investigations with Reference to the Genetic History of the Messianic Faith". *The Kingship of God*, to be published in 1932, was planned as the first volume of this work. The purpose of

Buber in writing this book was to consider the meaning of the passages of Gideon, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you” (Judges 8:23), in order to demonstrate that the faith in the rule of God as king of the people had realistic and historic significance for the Israelites during the early period of Israel (the period of Joshua and Judges after the death of Moses and before the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel with Saul serving as king).

The second volume that was to follow *The Kingship of God* was not completed after all, but some part of it was taken over by *The Anointed One*, in which Buber explores how the holy nature of the king of Israel can be compatible with the representation of ‘God as king of the people.’ In this work, Buber discusses the crisis that faced the kingdom through his interpretation of the passage, “But when they (elders of Israel) said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ this displeased Samuel” (1 Samuel 8:6). The basic question Buber raises in this work is how the king, as a human agent of God, could be part of the primitive theocracy and how he altered the notion of theocracy. Thus, in the first and second volumes, namely, *The Kingship of God* and *The Anointed One*, Buber pursues the same theme, the ‘direct rule of God in the Bible,’ while in the third volume, *Moses*⁷⁾, he discusses the shift of the concepts of the ‘direct rule of God’ and ‘theocracy’ from historical to eschatological.

The faith of the Israelites in the Messiah, a theme Buber chose when writing this series of works, is directed toward fulfilling the relationship between God and the world under the perfect sovereignty of God, because, Buber maintains, the “believing memory of the Israelites that they once proclaimed Yahweh as their direct and exclusive folk-king” (Buber, KG, S.491) enabled them to remain hopeful in their faith in the Messiah. In the background, there existed a trend toward direct theocracy or the belief that Yahweh will rule over us forever as king of our people, in the early period of Israel. To demonstrate this, Buber authored *The Kingship of God*.

1. Theocracy and the Direct Rule of God

The main theme of *The Kingship of God* is theocracy (*Theokratie*), a belief that God has sovereignty and that people seek the direct rule of God. In the general understanding of historians, however, the strongest form of “theocracy,” in substance, is the power of men over others, and it refers to unrestricted control of human rulers over subjects (followers). Further, such power is believed to be delegated by God or the power itself is believed to be divine (Buber, KG, S. 540). This means, seen from a historical viewpoint, theocracy is identical with hierocracy (*Hierokratie*), and the latter is considered to be ruled by people chosen by God, such as the priestly class (Buber, KG, S. 539–540). On the other hand, Buber maintains that hierocracy, or the system of sovereignty by the priestly class on behalf of God is the most antagonistic to the message of the Bible⁸⁾.

Buber tries to shed light on the nature of theocracy through his interpretation of the ‘passages of Gideon in the Book of Judges’ and the ‘Sinai Covenant in the Book of Exodus’. According to the foreword of the second edition of *The Kingship of God*, Buber’s aim in this book is to demonstrate the validity of the view that “the principle of leadership which again and again united the tribes was indissolubly bound up with the tendency toward a direct theocracy in the period of Judges that precedes the period of the Kingdom” (Buber, KG, S. 520). Instead of shifting to monarchical rule (rule by state), the Israelites had maintained a unique system of sovereignty for about 200 years since their settlement in the Land of Canaan around the end of the 13th century B.C. The fact that other peoples who settled in Palestine around the same period soon shifted to monarchical rule accentuates the uniqueness of the Israelites, who had a non-monarchical sovereignty during the period of Judges. Furthermore, perhaps we may say that the reason behind this uniqueness is the belief of the Israelites that they should not be ruled by men, as God is their only ruler. In this regard, Buber holds that, during the period of Judges, human sovereignty was not in place, that no political realm existed outside of the theocratic realm, and that all of the people belonged directly to Yahweh (Buber, KG, S. 683–684). In his view, this system of sovereignty was defined by the master-subject relationship between God and the Israelites under the Sinai Covenant. In other words, under this covenant, a direct relationship between God as leader and the people as followers was established. In this way, Buber understands theocracy as the direct rule of God over the tribes of Israel and attempts to verify that the complete denial of rule by a human king is at the core of the Hebrew Bible.⁹⁾

2. Buber’s Interpretation of the Book of Judges: The Gideon Passage

Here, let me focus on the biblical depiction of the period of Judges shortly after the settlement of the Israelites in Canaan, and consider on which description in the Book of Judges Buber relied on when developing his view of theocracy and the direct rule of God. The following passage is an example of Buber’s understanding of the Book of Judges.

“If one disregards smaller inserted passages, the work (of Judges) is composed of two books between which stand the two dissimilar Samson legends. Each of the two books is edited from a following viewpoint, the first from an anti-monarchical, and the second from a monarchical” (Buber, KG, S. 553).

If one eliminates from the first twelve chapters of the book of Judges, the sketchy sections, the general reflections, and the speeches of the ‘messenger’ (angel of the Lord) (2: 1–5) and of the ‘interpreter (prophet)’ (6: 7–10), as well as the statements concerning the ‘minor’ judges of whom nothing is really related, then one obtains a succession of seven stories, and every one of which expresses the anti-monarchical tendency. In these stories, some secretly express and

others explicitly speak scornfully or critically about their disapproval of human kingship and the monarchical system, or, at least, they speak in a manner that boasts of the vantage of a kingless Israel (Buber, KG, S. 553).

Dennis Olson, who addresses the composition of the Book of Judges most intensively in the contemporary study on Buber, states that “For Buber, however, the high point of this antimonarchical ‘book’ within Judges is the figure of Gideon in Judges 6–8” (Olson, 2004, p. 200), referring to Buber’s views that “the anti-monarchical book centers plainly in him (Gideon) and his house’s,” and that “He is the genuine hero of the primitive-theocratic legend” (Buber, KG, S. 556). Gideon was a judge who won the battle against Midian and saved the Israelites by following the command of God. After his sweeping victory over Midian, the Israelites said to Gideon (Jerubbaal):

“Rule over us—you, your son, and your grandson.” (Judges 8:22)

By saying this, the Israelites offered kingship to Gideon and asked him to rule over them as their king. However, Gideon rejected their offer by saying:

“I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.” (Judges 8:23)

By these passages, Gideon declined to accept the sovereignty offered to him. Buber sees in these passages true modesty and piety, and maintains that Gideon’s decline reflects the notion that “no humans should rule over you. Only Yahweh, and only God Himself, should rule over you” and that this notion is valid unconditionally in all the periods and in all kinds of histories (Buber, KG, S. 539). Buber further argues that these passages of Gideon indicate the importance of the “rule of God” as a subject of serious study.

On the other hand, biblical scholars since Wellhausen have addressed the passages of Gideon by an approach different from that of Buber (Buber, KG, S. 541). Generally, they share the view that the “Book of Judges has been regarded as a late collection of legendary material” (Buber, KG, S. 549). For example, they argue that the idea of “people” as a unified entity was not known at all during the period of Judges, and that it is through editing in later ages that several tribes were described as one people. According to their view, the story of Gideon declining to accept the sovereignty could not have been conceived until the kingless period after the Babylonian captivity, and there could have been no call for theocracy in the earlier period (the period of Judges). Put otherwise, they hold that the passages of Gideon were added to the text of the Book of Judges far much later in history with an intention to revise historical description, and this addition is regarded as a tendentious alteration of the original description that can no longer be confirmed.¹⁰⁾ To verify this notion, recent biblical study indicates the discrepancy between the *rule of God* (Judges 8:23) and the *rule of man* (Judges 9:2). After the death of Gideon (Jerubbaal), his son, Abimelech, met the chiefs and large landowners of his hometown, and asked, “Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerubbaal’s sons rule over you, or just one man?” (Judges 9:2) In general, this remark is interpreted to mean that Gideon did accept

the sovereignty after all and passed the kingship to his son, and that rule by a human king was actually exercised in those days.

However, as pointed out by Thomas Wagner whose research focuses on the rule of God in the Bible, Buber rebuts this view by arguing that the idea of theocracy dates back earlier than the captivity period.¹¹ According to Buber, the passages of Gideon (Judges 8:23) and those of Abimelech (Judges 9:2) together constitute one whole in terms of both meaning and writing style, and they are perfectly in agreement with each other, regardless of whether they stem from the same tradition or not (Buber, KG, S.544). First, let me focus on the verb used here. In the Hebrew text, the verb *mashal* is used in both of these verses, instead of *malakh* (meaning *to rule over as a king*). Meanwhile, these parts are considered to relate to the concept of kingship, as not *malakh*, a verb that is used in combination with 'king' (*melekh*), but *mashal*, which means *to govern* (Genesis 45:8, 26) and *to have charge of* (Genesis 24:2), is used. It should be noted, however, that *mashal* does not signify to rule over as a king or to have sovereignty. Accordingly, Buber concludes, in this context, the verb *mashal* means "not to possess the authority or power of a ruler formally but to practice power actually" (Buber, KG, S. 543),

Next, let me pay attention to the writing style. The expression "rule over you" is used in both of the two verses in question. In Buber's view, "Repetition is, in the Biblical style, the great means for singling out or emphasizing inner connections" (Buber, KG, S. 543). He calls the word repeatedly used in the Bible 'guiding word' (*Leitwort*) and tries to shed light on the internal relationship between these two remarks.¹² He maintains that the repetition of the verb *mashal* is intended to indicate the necessity to inaugurate the principle of a wholesome monarchical system (*malakh* by God), in order to avoid transfer of the kingship to Gideon's sons and grandsons, who were compared to a herd of cattle. Therefore, the father (Gideon), as an enthusiast, declined to accept sovereignty for himself and his descendants and said that kingship belongs to God alone. In Buber's opinion, the decline of Gideon to accept sovereignty is an especially favored part in the first half of the Book of Judges, as it embraces the idea of the 'exclusive kingship of God' that does not hold any human kings as rivals. Additionally this theme is given further emphasis by the remark by Gideon's son. Referring to Jotham fable (Judges 9), Buber says "this is the strongest anti-monarchical poem of world literature and the counterpart of the Gideon passage" (Buber, KG, S. 562).

3. Original Form of Theocracy: The Sinai Covenant in the Exodus

Next, I will discuss theocracy from the perspective of the 'Sinai Covenant', which defined the relationship between God and the Israelites via the Exodus. In *The Kingship of God*, Buber refers to the view of Elias Auerbach, who, in his *Desert and Promised Land (Wüste und Gelobtes Land)* Vol.2, argues that the notion of the divine rule over the Israelites is "entirely different from the powerful conception of God as the Lord of all peoples and the guide (*Leiter*) of history"

depicted in the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Deutero-Isaiah” (Buber, KG, S. 524). Buber rebuts this view by maintaining that, from the perspective of Amos 9 :8, the description of Yahweh as the “lord of all peoples” and as the “guide of history” by these prophets should be interpreted in the following manner.

“He (divine *melekh*) has brought each people into a good land and has helped it to occupy and to settle that land. Each people has erected for itself upon the new *adama* (land) a political order, has chosen for itself men as *melakhim* (kings), founded dynasties, has grown into a *mamlakha* (a king’s domain, a kingdom). He, however, Yahweh, the primeval Leader, primeval Founder, has remained the Overlord of these *mamlakhot*, Who judges them and extirpates those who sin from the *adama* (Amos 9:8)” (Buber, KG, S. 525).

In this quotation, Buber says that Yahweh is the Overlord of each people. This does not mean, however, that Yahweh was the head of a “state” that did not exist in the earlier history of Israel, but it means that Yahweh was the head of an federation of tribes seeking a land to settle in, and in this sense, He can be compared to the god Molech of the West Semitic tradition (Buber, KG, S. 625).¹³⁾ In Buber’s view, therefore, the picture of Yahweh presented by the prophets is that of a leader who rules over the peoples, but what is of greater importance for Buber is, rather, the first part of the above quotation.

Namely, Buber sees Yahweh as God walking-on-before, the ‘Leading God’ (*der führende Gott*) who guided the Israelites and all the other wandering peoples to a good land (Buber, KG, S. 608). Unlike Baal, Yahweh was not tied to one place. Instead, Yahweh traveled great distances to meet people of His choosing, took them out of the area, and accompanied and guided them. In this sense, Yahweh, God of Israel, was a leader of the Israelites, and He was always ‘with the people’ and traveling with them, and this is most characteristic of Yahweh’s nature. Needless to say, the most important incident for Yahweh as the Leading God is the Exodus when He released the Israelites from slavery and guided them to the Promised Land.

According to Anne Moor, the ‘song of the sea’ (Exodus 15:1b–18) is taken as one of the oldest pieces of evidence regarding the kingship of Yahweh by many scholars, including Wellhausen, Sigmund Mowinckel, David Noel Freedman, Frank M. Cross, and Buber, which is because these scholars support the notion that sources written in the form of ‘poem’ date back to the earliest periods in history.¹⁴⁾ The song of the sea is concluded with the passage, “The Lord will reign for ever and ever” (Exodus 15:18). In this way, this song presents a basic view of the sovereignty of God and shows the central factor that links the story of the Exodus to the covenant between God and the Israelites. The passage of Exodus 15:18 shows that the basis of the sovereignty of Yahweh was established through His powerful act of releasing the Israelites from slavery. Considering that this song precedes the Sinai Covenant chronologically, the act of Yahweh should be understood as having provided the basis of the relationship between the

Israelites and Yahweh as their king.¹⁵⁾

Following the Exodus, the relationship between God and the Israelites was formulated through the rite of the Sinai Covenant (Buber, KG, S. 652). According to Exodus 24, Moses built an altar at the foot of Mt. Sinai and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, Moses sacrificed animals as offerings to God, and sprinkled half of the blood on the altar and the other half on the people. Upon completion of the rite, Moses said, “This is the blood of the covenant that Yahweh has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Exodus 24:8). Originally, a covenant is designed to combine two mutually independent parties via animal blood and verify their close relationship. However there is more to it: Buber maintains that a covenant “does not only establish a relationship, but it can also alter an existing one in its character, compress, clarify, occasionally just sanction it, grant it sacred protection, re-establish one that has been broken, consecrate anew one that has been called into question” (Buber, KG, S. 660). In his view, the Sinai Covenant created a *kind* of relationship (*Beziehungsart*) that should be in place between Yahweh and the Israelites, instead of simply establishing a relationship between two mutually independent parties. Put otherwise, the Sinai Covenant “integrated the shepherd tribes into one group of people” (Buber, KG, S. 661) through the Exodus that involved a “release from slavery, many years of highly difficult wandering after the release, the drowning of the Egyptian pursuers, and promise and leadership” (*ibid.*). Through this process, the people became a politically composed wandering community in an orderly and organized manner. In this sense, the Sinai Covenant should be viewed as a “religio-political, and theopolitical act” (Buber, 1932, S. 662) designed to make up a group of people, not a simply religious act.

Buber also refers to the notion that Johannes Pedersen presented in *The Oath among the Semites* (*Der Eid bei den Semiten*, 1914). According to Pedersen, the covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites reflects the relationship between superior and subordinate and between giver and receiver. Like the covenant that David later made before God when he was anointed (Samuel 2, 5:3), “the position of the superior partner in this covenant is designated with the same word-stem *mlk*” (Buber, KG, S. 662). The Sinai Covenant confined both partners to a community which permits the difference and separateness of both to remain throughout, however it brought them into a relationship of unconditional super-ordination and subordination (Buber, KG, S. 659). In other words, the Sinai Covenant is a king’s covenant that defines the relationship between God as a king and the Israelites as subjects.

Then, what prevented the federation of semi-nomadic tribes wandering from Egypt from appointing a human leader to be their king? To answer this question, we have to understand the ‘Bedouin-ness’ (nomadic nature) of these tribes. The answer is *‘anawa* (being-bowed-down) or their ‘submission to’ the leader. The federation of tribes was conveyed by the message (*Botschaft*) of the one to whom it had submitted, and that it erected the theocracy upon this anarchic psychic basis (Buber, KG, S. 686). Therefore, we can understand the Sinai Covenant as

stipulating that “the wandering tribes accept Yahweh ‘for ever and ever’ as their King” and that “no man is to be called king of the sons of Israel” (Buber, KG, S. 683).

4. Reality of Theocracy: Charismatic Rule

In this section, I will consider how theocracy—the direct rule of God without any human king—works as a system of sovereignty. In response to criticism by Wilhelm Michaelis, Buber argues that theocracy, which is the main theme of *The Kingship of God*, refers to the efforts of people to seek the rule of God in this world. As this remark indicates, theocracy should be viewed as an actual system of sovereignty. On the other hand, Buber also mentions that theocracy is not hierocracy and expresses disagreement on the human clergy of organized religious institutions acting for God in the name of theocracy. What is meant by the concept of theocracy, he argues, is “belief in a *charis* which, always in the right moment, grants to chosen men the genuine charisma” (Buber, KG, S. 537). Seen from an extra-religious point of view, the theocratic order envisions community as voluntariness, which, if each of them acts freely, may fall into disorder (natural state). Because of the essential absence of conquering powers to overcome such a situation, a new pronouncement from above, a new charisma, is being awaited (Buber, KG, S. 703).

Max Weber defines charismatic rule as ‘ruled by men who are given a leader’s role as God’s gift, and Buber himself refers to this definition. Charisma (a special gift) stems from God’s *charis* (grace). As such, charisma never rests but it keeps hovering. Charisma cannot be possessed by anyone: it just comes and goes as *ruach* (spirit). There is no assurance of power, “only the streams of an authority which presents itself and moves away” (Buber, KG, S. 688). In this way, Yahweh gave charisma to the man of His choosing from time to time by communicating His will to him and making him perform His will, while the man could not exercise any power beyond the limited, given mission. He was allowed to rule people not on his own, but only as an agent of God—in reality, no authority was conferred to him.

Consequently, direct theocracy is fundamentally incompatible with hereditary human kingship. For this reason, priestly families are not allowed to take on a leader’s role—unlike priestly functions that can be passed on from father to son, political functions involve a leader’s role and therefore must be absolutely charismatic. In other words, the direct rule of God, or theocracy, is, in substance, ‘charismatic rule’ by a man who is temporarily delegated power by God, and this should be distinguished from hierocracy, namely, rule by a priest as an agent of God. The essence of the system of theocratic sovereignty is ‘selection and decline’ or ‘commission and deprivation’ by Yahweh. Unlike human kingship that can be lasting and eventually develop into a dynasty, the judges were assigned limited missions only—they were possessed by *ruach* and made to battle the enemies of Yahweh and Israel.¹⁶⁾ Additionally by receiving *ruach*, they brought a legal order to the communities that had been released. In the Book of Judges that is

anti-monarchic in nature, there is no mediation of priests. Instead, God's *ruach* seizes upon a man, and gives him, not power and dignity, but limited missions, and Buber says that is enough of that (Buber KG, S. 721).

During the period of Judges, however, people became no longer satisfied with charismatic leaders given to them from time to time by God to bail them out of a crisis, and began to call for a leader to rule the nation with large power. In Chapter 8 of the First Book of Samuel, people came to Samuel to ask him to appoint a king to lead them. This is in conflict with the basic faith of the federation of tribes that God is the only ruler of Israel. In *The Anointed One*, therefore, Buber focuses on the Books of Samuel and discusses the shift of the Israelites to becoming ruled by the Kingdom.

5. Form of Theocratic Society: A Federation of Communities

In the above section, I have discussed the charismatic rule rooted in theocracy that was exercised during the period of Judges that precedes the period of the Kingdom. In this section, let me focus on the form of society in those days. Martin Noth argues that originally, "Israel" was the name of a federation of the twelve tribes and points out the similarity of this federation to the forms of the societies that emerged in Greece and Italy shortly after the period of Judges. He calls this type of social form 'amphictyony' (*Amphiktionie*) which means a "society of people gathering around a sanctuary from time to time". According to his notion, it is a religious federation consisting of six or twelve tribes united freely for nonpolitical purposes. The essential factors of amphictyony are: a sanctuary as the core of the religious federation; common religious regulations binding all its members; common rituals that provided venue for the tribes to meet regularly; and religious traditions shared among them. These factors are also seen in the federation of the Israelite tribes. At first, their central sanctuary was Shechem, which was moved to Bethel, Gilgal, and then to Shiloh.¹⁷⁾ Buber admits that society during the period of Judges was a loose federation of twelve tribal communities, but it seems that Buber views this society not as a religious federation formed just to worship and protect a sanctuary as advocated by Noth (Buber, KG, S. 701), but as a federation formed for political and economic purposes (Buber, KG, S. 711). In the foreword of the second edition of *The Kingship of God*, Buber writes that Wilhelm Caspari, in his *The Theocrat (Der Theokrat, 1935)*, expresses a critical view of Buber's interpretation of theocracy as follows.

"a loose federation of communities (*ein loser Verband von Gemeinwesen*), at high points of their activity or in crisis (Judges 1), placed themselves under a divine leadership. This situation is too original to count as theocracy, namely as a subordination under God resulting in *state* form" (Buber, KG, S. 501)

Here, attention should be paid to the word “state” (*staatlich*), which Buber italicizes for emphasis. According to Caspari, theocracy refers to a system of sovereignty by a deified human king, who rules people as an agent of God, and such a system is possible only in a society that has the form of a state, such as an empire (*ibid*). Consequently, Caspari concludes that theocracy in the form of the direct rule of God could not have been in place during the period of Judges, when a kingdom was not yet established (Buber, KG, S. 502). However, it should be noted that Caspari considers the concept of theocracy only within the framework of a “state” system. In this light, it is only natural that he cannot find theocracy in the period of Judges that precedes the period of the Kingdom. Rather, if the system of sovereignty in place during the period of Judges, by which, if we use the words of Caspari shown the first part of the above quotation, a “loose federation of communities placed themselves under a divine leadership”, is deemed to correspond to Buber’s notion of “theocracy in which God directly rules the people”, there is no discrepancy between their views. This means, the concept of theocracy should be considered in light of a federation of communities, not that of a state form, and, in this sense, we should next explore the notion of Buber on a loose federation of communities, which Buber discusses in depth in his papers about social thought. In the next section, therefore, let me depart from *The Kingship of God* and focus on *Paths in Utopia* (*Pfade in Utopia*) to examine how he addresses this issue.

6. Concept of Utopian Society: an autonomous voluntary communities

In the last chapter of *The Kingship of God*, titled ‘Concerning the Theocracy’, Buber discusses his view of theocracy in detail, stating that

“the sociological ‘utopia’ of a voluntary community (*Gemeinschaft aus Freiwilligkeit*)¹⁸⁾ is nothing else but the immanent side of the direct theocracy” (Buber, KG, S. 687).

By saying this, Buber means that the social form within the direct theocracy (direct rule of God) in his understanding may be called a ‘voluntary community’ or, to use a sociological term, *utopia*. This statement of Buber indicates the necessity for us to explore how his view of theocracy shown in *The Kingship of God* is associated with the concept of utopia in a sociological sense. In *The Kingship of God*, Buber presents his view of utopia to a limited extent as reference only, so we must refer to his *Paths in Utopia*¹⁹⁾ (1949) which contains in-depth discussion on utopian socialism²⁰⁾ and an ideal community²¹⁾ within the framework of the utopian socialist thought. I will explore whether any suggestion is found in *Paths in Utopia* concerning an ideal federation of communities in terms of theocracy. In this work, Buber first defines the concept of utopia as follows.

“The utopian picture is a picture of what ‘should be,’ and the visionary is one who wishes it to be” (Buber, PU, S. 843).

“Utopian socialism fights for the maximum degree of communal autonomy (*Gemeinschaftsautonomie*) possible in a ‘restructured’ society (*Gesellschaft*)” (Buber, PU, S. 852).

Through these definitions, Buber indicates that utopia is not a place that does not exist anywhere but a place to be coveted, and that utopian socialists are seeking the autonomy of utopia within society to the most possible extent. Then, what do these utopian socialists mean by an “ideal autonomy of community?” Utopian socialism was founded by Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen, and developed to perfection by Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Pjotr Alekseyevich Kropotkin and, especially, Gustav Landauer. Therefore, we should first look to the form of society these thinkers were after. They regard a ‘Co-operative’ (*Genossenschaft*) as the most important unit of society. A Co-operative aims to create a small voluntary community between the state and each individual, and through this community, to change and innovate the mutual relationship among the members of the society from inside to eventually establish a new community. Therefore, a Co-operative should not be autotelic (Buber, PU, S. 926–927). In other words, utopian socialists aim to change society from the inside, gradually on a phased basis, through the voluntary participation of members of the society, instead of changing the entire society forcibly from outside by means of laws or institutions. In their view, true society consists of small communities that are based on communal life and a federation of such communities (Co-operative). In addition, the relationships among the members of these small communities, and those between the small communities and their federations (Co-operative), should be defined by a social principle that provides as much internal linkage as possible among them. It seems this description perfectly matches the reality of ‘an autonomous voluntary community’. Buber expresses his view on the form of society as follows.

“The real living together of man with man can only thrive where people have the real things of their communal life in common; where they can experience, discuss and administer them together; where real fellowships (*Nachbarschaft*) and real work Guilds (*Werkgild*) exist... Needless to say we cannot and do not want to go back to primitive agrarian communism or to the corporate State of the Christian Middle Ages” (Buber, PU, S. 852).

Utopian socialists view society as a combination of regional and vocational communities and a federation of such communities. In this sense, utopian socialism may be called *regional socialism*. This thought holds that the true social actor and the true owner of the means of social production is not a centralized state authority, but a social entity consisting of rural and

urban workers who live together and engage in productive activities together, along with the organizations representing these workers. In utopian society, “the remodeled organs of the State will discharge the functions of adjustment and administration only” (Buber, PU, S. 992). Buber maintains this concept will be supported by more people in the future, providing a basis for a new society and new culture. This form of society requires the following: structural renewal of society as a federation of communities; the reduction of the centralized functions of the state; socialistic pluralism; a group freedom that is reviewed on a daily basis in accordance with constantly changing conditions; and the correct balance of overall order. What stands opposite to this is: absorption of formless society by an almighty state; “socialistic” unitarianism; and an absolute order forcibly imposed on people for an unknown period of time (ibid.).

In chapter 2 of *The Kingship of God*, Buber compares the passages of Gideon with a fable of Taoism, and points out that Taoism, too, allegorically teaches that “the kingship...is not a productive calling. It is vain, but also bewildering and seditious, that men rule over men” (Buber, KG, S. 562). Especially interesting is a passage from a Taoist poem that says “everyone is to pursue his own proper business, and the manifold fruitfulnesses will constitute a community over which, in order that it endure, no one needs to rule—no one except God alone” (Buber, KG, S. 562–563). This exactly corresponds to the description of the nature of a utopian society that is comprised of a federation of individual vocational associations. Additionally, the denial by the community of top-down control bears a similarity to the anti-monarchic notion of the author or redactor of the Book of Judges that all a community needs is a ‘invisible sovereignty (*eine unsichtbare Obigkeit*)’.

The view of a utopian society that Buber developed is characterized by his emphasis on the reduction of state functions as well as on Co-operative unions and guild society united by voluntary will, which strikes us as highly interesting, all the more because we have examined Buber’s thought starting from his interpretation of the Book of Judges and the direct rule of God to charismatic rule, and then to a federation of the tribes above.

Conclusion

Theocracy is a notion that only God has the sovereignty to rule people, and this naturally requires the restriction of the power of human rulers to have control over people. Put otherwise, the direct rule of God serves to ‘completely relativize human power’. In the system of theocratic sovereignty, God, as the only king, ruled tribes and appointed a leader from time to time from among the members of the tribes as necessary. This charismatic rule is, in substance, the direct rule of God, and under this system, a loose federation of the twelve tribes was formed—a social form unique to the period of Judges.

Interestingly, the ideas of ‘a voluntary community’ and ‘a federation of communities’ that Buber presented as part of his interpretation of the ‘direct rule of God’ in the Book of Judges

provides a basis of the notions of the ‘reduction of the centralized functions of a state’ and ‘socialistic pluralism’, which Buber developed later in his discussion on utopian society. Buber was affected by the religious socialism that prevailed in Switzerland and Germany in the early 20th century and developed his own sociological view that encourages a shrinking economy to the extent that allows us to sustain a “minimum necessary” lifestyle, along with the introduction of a Full Co-operative capable of achieving a perfect balance between production and consumption. Utopian sociology envisions communal life that mainly relies on agriculture for economic sustenance, and through an organic association with industries and handicrafts, ensures a linkage between production and consumption. In other words, it is a pluralistic economic system in which different vocational associations work in harmony, while a top-down sovereign system like a state government has only limited power. Eventually, Buber sought such an ideal utopia in the “Hebrew village commune (*Genossenschaftsdorf*) in Palestine” (Buber, PU, S.983). He chose Palestine as a place to practice his utopian socialist thought and tried to construct a village commune (*Kvuza, Kibbutz*) there, while acting as a member of the Zionist movement at the same time. Now, we are left with the task of exploring how Buber’s utopian thought worked behind his attempt to construct a Co-operative or village commune in Palestine.

I hope the above discussion has shed some light on the relevance between Buber’s view of theocracy in the Hebrew Bible and his own utopian social thought.

NOTES

- 1) This paper was written by expanding and revising my paper titled, “On the Direct Rule of God in the Bible and its Significance in the Context of the History of Thoughts: From the Interpretation of the Book of Judges by Buber,” which I presented at “Possibilities of Martin Buber’s Thought and Hermeneutics: between Germanness and Jewishness,” a symposium held on May 15, 2010 for the division of “Religious Scriptures and Political Thought” of the young researchers’ study group of CISMOR of Doshisha University on May 15, 2010.
- 2) BUBER Martin, *WERKE Zweiter Band -Schriften zur Bibel*, München: Kösel-Verlag, Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1964, “Königtum Gottes”(1932), (referred to as “KG” in this paper).
- 3) Buber responded to the criticisms by these German biblical researchers in the forewords of the second and third editions of *The Kingship of God*.
- 4) OLSON T. Dennis, “Buber, Kingship, and the Book of Judges: A Study of Judges 6–9 and 17–21,” *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts*, Eisenbrauns, 2004.
- 5) BUBER Martin, *Königtum Gottes, Kami no okoku*, trans. Kenichi Kida, Hiroshi Kita, Board of Publications of the United Church of Christ in Japan, 2003, p.9–12 (See the foreword in the first edition of *The Kingship of God*.)
- 6) Buber addressed this theme repeatedly in his lectures and presentations for seven years. Especially, he dealt with this theme in greater depth in the lectures he gave during the 1924–1925 winter semester at the University of Frankfurt.

- 7) The Japanese translation of the *Works of Martin Buber on the Bible*, is comprised of *Moses (Vol. 1)*, *Kami no okoku (The Kingship of God) (Vol. 2)*, and *Abura sosogareta mono (The Anointed One) (Vol. 3)*.
- 8) The difference between “theocracy” and “hierocracy” is discussed in detail in section 4 of this paper “Reality of Theocracy: Charismatic Rule,”
- 9) J. Kaufmann, a biblical scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, after reading the first edition of *The Kingship of God*, criticizes this understanding of Buber, saying “to be sure, a primitive theocracy in Israel as historical, but my interpretation of a theocratic tendency in the sense of the exclusion of a human kingship as far too venturesome” (Buber, KG, S. 519).
- 10) To show disagreement with Flavius Josephus, who coined the concept of theocracy, Wellhausen argues that theocracy in the form of constitution (*Urverfassung*) never existed in ancient Israel (Buber, KG, S. 547).
- 11) “Buber uses the concept of theocracy as the meaning of State form arranged to Yahweh in his research. However he doesn’t regard the sovereignty of priest in the period after the Babylonian captivity as theocracy alone. Rather he already understand the monarchical state form as such in the period before the Babylonian captivity. The decisive feature of theocracy is the direct rule of Yahweh.” See note 4 of WAGNER Thomas, *Gottes Herrschaft: Eine Analyse der Denkschrift (Jes 6,1–9,6)*, Brill Leiden-Boston, 2006, p. 2.
- 12) BUBER, Martin, *Zu Einer Neuen Verdeutschung der Schrift*, Beilage zum ersten Band: Die Fünf Bücher der Weisung, Verdeutscht von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig, 10. Verbesserte Auflage der neubearbeiteten Ausgabe von 1954, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 1992, S. 13.
- 13) Jeremiah called Yahweh the “melekh of the peoples” in 10:7, and the “living God,” the “melekh for the cosmic period (*Weltzeit*) in 10:10” (Buber, KG, S. 625).
- 14) MOORE Anne, *Moving beyond Symbol and Myth: Understanding the Kingship of God of the Hebrew Bible through Metaphor*, Peter Lang Publishing, 2009, p. 66.
- 15) ESLINGER Lyle M., *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12*, Sheffield Academic Pr, 1985, p. 266.
- 16) *Ruach* propels a *navi* (1 Kings 18:12) and it propels him into battle.
- 17) Today, this “amphictyony” hypothesis is denied by many scholars, but it is generally agreed that the society of Israel before the period of the Kingdom took the form of a federation of tribes.
- 18) Basically, the essential identity of human beings lies in the technological world created against nature, but more importantly, it is interdependent in the sense that we have to act in cooperation with others for defense, hunting, food, and labor, and at the same time, it is also mutually independent. We have to build a true community based on the independence of humans, as well as on mutual respect and responsibility for such independence (Buber, PU, S. 852). This is similar to achieving the ultimate goal of freedom and diversity.
- 19) BUBER Martin, *WERKE Erster Band: Schriften zur Philosophie*, München: Kösel-Verlag, Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1962, “Pfade in Utopia” (1949). (referred to as “PU” in this paper).
- 20) Buber studied in Leipzig in 1898 at the age of 20, when he was deeply attracted to the ideology of Ferdinand Lassalle, a Jewish socialist, even delivering a speech about him. From 1905–1912,

Buber engaged in the editing of *Gesellschaft*, a series of works on philosophy, and wrote a foreword to *The Proletariat (Das Proletariat)* by Werner Sombart, contained in the first volume of *Gesellschaft*, in which Buber presents his socialistic view using the term “between man and man.” His interest in socialism grew largely during World War I, partly through his association with Gustav Landauer as well as through *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*, authored by Ferdinand Tönnies.

- 21) Buber does not view a community as one society that exists in parallel with other societies, but argues that a community requires the power of religion at its core. In an essay titled “Three Essays on Religious Socialism” (1928), Buber mentions as follows: religious socialism can only mean that religion and socialism are essentially directed to each other, that each of them needs the covenant with the other for the fulfillment of its own essence. *Religio*, that is the human person’s binding of himself to God, can only attain its full reality in the will for a community of the human race, out of which alone God can prepare His kingdom. *Socialitas*, that is mankind’s becoming a fellowship (*Genossenschaftwerden*), man’s becoming a fellow (*Genossenwerden*) to man, cannot develop otherwise than out of a common relation to the divine centre (BUBER Martin, *Hinweise*, “Drei Sätze eines religiöse Sozialismus,” Manesse Verlag, 1953, S. 284). In those days, Buber felt great empathy with the Swiss religious socialist movement launched by Herrmann Kutter, Christoph Blumhardt, and Leonhard Ragaz, along with the theological movement stemming from that movement led by Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen.

That their truth is God's truth? Does the biblical author mean to imply that the ethical strictures governing family and tribal life fade before the importance of choosing a person capable of carrying the blessing unto the next generation? Another recent English translation of the Five Books of Moses, published in 1995 by the Jewish studies scholar Everett Fox, also preserves its key words and archaic texture. Fox pays explicit tribute to Buber and Rosenzweig in his introduction, and his "Five Books" are in some ways truer to the Hebrew -- to the full measure of its foreignness -- than Alter's. But Alter's translation is better. His brilliant commentary, in footnotes on the bottom half of each page, draws on insights from the rabbis as well as modern scholars, adding depth to his own readings.