Surrogate God: A Christian Perspective on the State

James O’Connor
Austrian Student Scholars Conference
15 October 2008
Most Austrian economists will agree that a sound study of economics necessitates the conclusion that the state, defined as a territorial monopolist of coercion, has only a very limited function in regard to the economy. Economists like Murray Rothbard and Hans Hoppe carry this idea to its logical conclusion: the state is entirely detrimental, and people are better off without it. While their arguments on the issue are important, they are not the main focus here. Suffice it to say this: coercive monopolies are dangerous when they have only economic power and protection from competition. Giving them the authority to rob, incarcerate, and kill people does nothing to make said monopoly beneficial. The defense and justice industries are subject to the same laws of competition as any other industry, with the same and worse effects caused by monopolies. The strongest incentives for such a monopoly are to extort money from the citizens via crooked police and justice systems, then charge them for the extortion via taxes. (see *Democracy: the God That Failed* by Hans-Hermann Hoppe, p. 230) Even constitutions designed to protect against such exploitation are useless in the long run; words on paper have proven incapable of stopping people who are determined to circumvent them. (*Who Killed the Constitution* by Thomas Woods covers this in depth.)

Rothbard’s and Hoppe’s arguments are very convincing for people who are satisfied with pure logic, but their entirely secular arguments can leave Christians dubious. The Bible is the ultimate source of truth for Christians, and it is often interpreted to condone any number of state actions. To the contrary, somewhat similar
conclusions to Rothbard’s and Hoppe’s can be found in the Bible, primarily in the books of Chronicles and Kings. Those ideas will be examined here; then, the beginnings of the state will be analyzed briefly from both an economic and religious perspective.

It will be assumed here that the Bible is true, at minimum in its historical record. For those who do not believe this premise, much has been written about the Bible’s validity elsewhere. It is a large topic in itself, and it falls beyond the scope of this analysis.

The Old Testament historical books follow the history of a state from early roots to demise; thus, they are a rich source of relevant information. The ideal method of analysis would be to look for the word “state” in a concordance, but there is a slight problem: there is only one kind of state (monarchy) mentioned, while there are any number of types of states existing today. This is of little concern, however. The monarchy was the only type of state available at the time the books of history were written. It is therefore, reasonable to assume that statements about kings are applicable to states in general. That said, an analysis is now possible, and it will be accomplished primarily by negative proof.

When the Israelites were released from slavery in Egypt, they were led by Moses, who was recruited directly by God to lead them to the Promised Land. To lead the people, Moses installed a tiered command structure. One could argue that this is an example of God appointing a state. There was a distinct command structure, and several people died for their disobedience: for instance Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16. However, Moses was mostly a middleman for God, not a king or ruler. When Moses used force, it was through God’s authority, not his own, and it was always
by God’s specific instruction. Because Moses’ system did not act independently or use its own power, it was not a state in itself, but simply a means of administrating a theocracy. Moses’ frequent use of Divine power, rather than his men, means that he had more in common with the prophets than King David.

The reasons for the command structure can be explained given the Israelites’ position. They had just been released from years of slavery, and needed to be led to a land that was a long journey away. They needed some sort of structure to get them all where they were going, and it needed to be something with which they were familiar. Furthermore, their failure to go into the Promised Land revealed that they were not ready to trust God enough to willingly live without something like a state. Thus, Moses’ system was not really a state so much as training wheels for freedom.

Joshua cements this idea - he got the Israelites into the Promised Land, and then did not appoint a human successor. God did not appoint one either. If the system was supposed to continue as a permanent institution, a successor would have been named. Instead, the organization was dissolved, leaving market anarchy.

But one might counter-argue that God let the Israelites have a king. Is this not an argument for the state in the Bible? It is quite the opposite; God states His reason for tolerating a state when He says to Samuel, “it is me they have rejected as their king. Just as they have done from the day that I brought them up from Egypt until this very day, they have rejected me and have served other gods. This is what they are also doing to you,” in 1 Samuel 8:7-8 (NETBible). Formation of a state, at least in this case, is open rejection of God; that much is very clear. Yet God allowed the Israelites to form a state in order to prove a point: when people try to abandon God in favor of a surrogate
(such as a state), they always fail. The failure here is very evident in a study of the books of Chronicles and Kings: eleven out of nineteen kings of Judah were evil. The books are riddled with verses like 1 Kings 22:52, speaking of Ahaziah: “He did evil in the sight of the Lord and followed in the footsteps of his father and mother; like Jeroboam son of Nebat, he encouraged Israel to sin” (NETBible). Verses that are nearly verbatim appear twelve times in 1 and 2 Kings.

A godly ruler might be able to do some limited good, and some of the kings did. But, it takes an exceptionally wise king to make up for the damage caused by the numerous malignant kings that usually precede them. Several of the “good” kings have notes like this one, speaking of Asa: “The high places were not eliminated from Israel (NETBible, 2 Chron. 15.17)....” This means that many of the good kings failed to fix the problems caused by their predecessors, even Asa, who receives an unusually positive report. Regardless of how well the good king did, it only takes one bad king to undo any repairs made by any number of good kings before him.

And what sort of good could a king do that the judges could not? Arbitration can be done by any wise person that people choose; judges add competition and ease of removability to what the kingship can offer. This effectively negates the possible drawbacks judges could have.

Kings could redistribute wealth, but that can only be harmful. If it was prudent for wealth to be in a certain configuration, free exchange would have put it there or been in the process of doing so. The king would not be needed for that purpose. Also compare the relative success rates: all twelve judges delivered the nation successfully and most brought about repentance for a time, whereas the kings were leading the apostasy more
often than the repentance. Because wise, truly beneficent kings are rare, and the judges offered the same benefit with very few of the drawbacks, the more prudent course is to not have a king or state in the first place.

Israel’s three main organization schemes (administrated theocracy under Moses, anarchy under the judges, and statehood under the kings) have said little in favor of the state. The next place to look is the specific commands and warnings, which have an even more explicit stance.

One of the most obvious commands about the formation of a state is in Deuteronomy 17:14-15, which says, “When you come to the land the Lord your God is giving you and take it over and live in it and then say, ‘I will select a king like all the nations surrounding me,’ you must select without fail a king whom the Lord your God chooses. From among your fellow citizens you must appoint a king – you may not designate a foreigner who is not one of your fellow Israelites” (NETBible). This might seem like an instruction to form a state. On the other hand, there are a few things that hinder this interpretation. The first comes from the wording of verse 14: it says “when you… select,” not “you should select,” or “go select.” That would indicate that it is similar to Moses saying, “Then when many disasters and distresses overcome them…” (NETBible, Deut. 31.21) or a driving instructor saying, “If you’re going to crash, aim for something cheap.” It does not mean that disasters or crashing is good; it just says what to do in the event that it happens.

In addition, Deuteronomy 17:16-20 gives the king a very specific set of restrictions:
Moreover, he must not accumulate horses for himself or allow the people to return to Egypt to do so, for the Lord has said you must never again return that way. Furthermore, he must not marry many wives lest his affections turn aside, and he must not accumulate much silver and gold. When he sits on his royal throne he must make a copy of this law on a scroll given to him by the Levitical priests. It must be with him constantly and he must read it as long as he lives, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and observe all the words of this law and these statutes and carry them out. Then he will not exalt himself above his fellow citizens or turn from the commandments to the right or left, and he and his descendants will enjoy many years ruling over his kingdom in Israel.

(NETBible)

Of the relevant things a king could do, this rules out many of them; it forbids accumulation of excessive wealth, horses (presumably for a permanent military), and wives. It also places the king under the law, much like the Magna Carta. Deuteronomy 25:15-16 (referring to unjust weights and measures) eliminates manipulating the money supply. This leaves his official duties as entertaining dignitaries and leading the militia in the event of an attack. However, judges would have no need to receive dignitaries, since complaints or requests would deal with individuals or possibly the temple. Handling attacks and invasions is the reason God recruited judges most of the time, and the judges were not in authority for a long enough period to start causing problems.

The strongest mention of a king is a well-known but rarely thought about passage in 1 Samuel, where Samuel attempts to dissuade the people from wanting a king:
He said, “Here are the policies of the king who will rule over you: He will conscript your sons and put them in his chariot forces and in his cavalry; they will run in front of his chariot. He will appoint for himself leaders of thousands and leaders of fifties, as well as those who plow his ground, reap his harvest, and make his weapons of war and his chariot equipment. He will take your daughters to be ointment makers, cooks, and bakers. He will take your best fields and vineyards and give them to his own servants. He will demand a tenth of your seed and of the produce of your vineyards and give it to his administrators and his servants. He will take your male and female servants, as well as your best cattle and your donkeys, and assign them for his own use. He will demand a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will be his servants. In that day you will cry out because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord won’t answer you in that day.” (NETBible, 1 Sam. 8.11-18)

Even the most cursory look at a history book will show how accurate that (rather conservative) warning has been for any nation. Looking at nations today, one would be hard-pressed to find a country without high taxes, a standing army, and disappointing amounts of bribery, not to mention eminent domain and dissatisfaction with leaders, including democratically-elected ones. The Israelites found themselves facing the full force of this warning under Rehoboam, the fourth king, who openly declared that he would be tyrannical (1 Kings 11). After that, another ten out of nineteen kings further validated that warning (1, 2 Kings). This should leave no doubt about the Old Testament’s record on the state.
Despite the negative things that economics and the Bible say with regard to the state, people still form them. The next course of examination is to figure out why this is so.

There seem to be several main reasons to form states, some of which are economic, and some of which are spiritual. The first could be called “robbers settling in.” Its basis is simple: minimizing cost and maximizing gain. If someone could succeed in coercing money out of his fellow people, why would he get an honest job? The problem is that stealing or extorting outright is likely to bring retribution, unless the victims could be convinced that it is in their best interest to be looted. The would-be ruler would start out breaking a few windows in the night, or possibly bribing a local thug to cause some trouble. Then he would set up a crooked “protective” agency, the purpose of which would be to only send out the thug on Wednesdays, instead of Monday through Friday. He would use this tactic to manipulate people in his area into following his lead and handing him money. Even if such a person does not set up a state himself, he is very likely to support anyone who does form one so that he can receive favors, or – even better – play the part of the thug. This attracts the less scrupulous people, and the rest follow by being manipulated or browbeaten. All it takes is a few dishonest people and a little cleverness, and the rest is history.

The second economic reason is more initially honest than the first: protection against an actual, pre-existing threat. These form among individuals the same way organizations like NATO and the United Nations form among nations. External attacks or threats prompt people to form a council for their defense. Eventually said group begins to arbitrate in disputes, exact fees for its services, and claim sovereignty over its
members. A new state is born. Note that defensive states always have a large capacity to threaten their citizens; “Mafia-style” states use real threats of their own creation, while defensive states use the possibility of threat by outside force. Either way, they have built-in excuses to expand their power.

If their purpose was supposed to be protection, the kings of Israel did a poor job. The temple was looted several times, and the people were eventually enslaved. Twice (that was specifically mentioned), the king was hiding behind the lines, rather than keeping order. Saul stayed back in his tent hiding from Goliath while his troops cowered and David – who was not even a soldier – went out to fight alone. Later, David stayed back in his capitol instead of leading the siege at Rabbah, found Bathsheba, then had one of his own officers murdered. Neither incident demonstrates anything good for the king. Is it any wonder that the psalmist says “It is better to take shelter in the Lord than to trust in princes” (NETBible, Psa. 118.9)?

Of course, it could also be said that the protection was even worse in the time of the judges, since the judges were constantly needed to fend off the various invading armies. This is not so. The threat of attack from the neighboring countries was always present. The kings simply shifted the focus of the problems from external conflicts to internal ones. The judges had to drive out invaders periodically, but that is the main thrust of what they did. The kings instead preferred to attack other countries and fight amongst themselves, rather than protect their own people.

The third reason is the situational incentive. This is why the Israelites wanted a king, instead of a new set of judges. This is the reason Deuteronomy 17:14 predicted that they would appoint one, and the people mentioned it specifically when they asked
Samuel for a king: “They said to him, ‘Look, you are old, and your sons don’t follow your ways. So now appoint over us a king to lead us, just like all the other nations have’ (NETBible, 1 Sam. 8.5, emphasis added).” They saw how well the other nations were able to oppress them. They wanted the system that apparently gave the other nations their success, but they did not realize the benefits of what they had. Also, they assumed that if men were in control of defense, they would not have to wait to be delivered, whereas God would let them be oppressed long enough to bring about repentance. What they failed to consider is that a king might invite more Divine wrath than he deflected.

Asking for a king was a blatant failure. God had specifically said that Israel was to be totally different from the other nations around them, but the people were very quick to use the nations surrounding them as role models, having lost their faith in God repeatedly. All the people saw was that the Philistines were not constantly being trampled by some stronger force and, unlike the Israelites, the Philistines had a king. Unfortunately, the kings failed to be the key to avoiding oppression. Rather than return to God – which historically would have achieved a lot of goals – the people and kings alike adopted the other nation’s gods as well as their state. This approach yielded oppression and failure more often than success. The people could have achieved much a higher success rate by trusting in God, since the common thread in their free periods was increased faith.

The fourth reason for forming a state takes a more spiritual angle on the issue. It deals with people getting confused spiritually, as occurs often in the Bible. Genesis says that man is created in the image of God. In Romans 1, Paul says that all men know the
truth about God in one way or another (NETBible, 1.18-22). It seems that being created in the image of God is part of this hardwired knowledge, as most idols look or act like people in some respect. It is a short logical jump from “image of” something to “substitute for” something, which is where the problems start. People get the idea that they can effectively wield power reserved for God. This proves to be a very difficult misunderstanding to dislodge, not only because people will tell themselves anything to avoid inconvenient truth, but also because the benefits to themselves are too great if they are right.

The people who follow this thought pattern tend to be honest and are frequently unaware of the damage they end up causing, because they assume they are doing a good thing. Unfortunately for them, reality asserts itself, and they fail to improve conditions through power. They respond by deluding themselves into thinking that they can succeed, but limits on their power prevent them from success. Thus their power grows along with their failure.

Despite all that has been said thus far, an obstacle to the argument remains. Romans 13:1-7 seems to contradict all that the Old Testament indicates. It says:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except by God’s appointment, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God. So the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will incur judgment (for rulers cause no fear for good conduct but for bad). Do you desire not to fear authority? Do good and you will receive its commendation, for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be in fear, for it does not bear the sword in vain. It is God’s servant to
administer retribution on the wrongdoer. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of the wrath of the authorities but also because of your conscience. For this reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants devoted to governing. Pay everyone what is owed: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. (NETBible)

It could be said that this passage says that all rulers are good, since they are appointed by God and are “servant[s] for your good.” However, not all that can be used for good is good in its own capacity. This verse instead aligns itself with Romans 8:28, which says, “all things work together for good for those who love God...” (NETBible) saying that whether circumstances are good or bad, they are still sent by God. Even the things that are bad in their own right will work out for the ultimate good in the end. For example, God specifically allowed Job to be afflicted in every way possible, but then blessed him for staying faithful. God also ordained Israel’s captivity in Babylon, and sent prophets to tell the people not to fight it. Paul’s being put in jail worked out for good as well, because he converted his jailer. This does not mean that disease, subjugation, and incarceration are good; it just says to make the best of them when they happen.

It is apparent that economics as a science has little to nothing good to say about the state and how it forms. In the meantime, the Bible does not say that the state is necessary in any respect, nor does it specifically command that one be formed. Instead, it is more wary of the whole concept, noting how easily people begin to place their ultimate faith in the state, rather than in God - even before the people are under a state themselves. If a state is formed, its functions should be limited such that it holds little
more power than a judge or private defense contractor - in which case economic analysis rules in favor of the private option. The Bible also warns how states can turn on their subjects rather quickly. It has additionally been noted that states that form for protection are dangerous due to their inherent methods of gaining power. It can also be argued that the state, when formed as a noble aspiration, is often a product of spiritual confusion rather than true perceptiveness. While the Bible is not an advocate of the state, it offers hope in that, however oppressive said state may be, it is still part of God's plan. This is not to say that those who know the truth should do nothing. If no one does anything to change the current circumstances, there is no way that the next stage of the plan might work out better than the current one. Thus, three conclusions present themselves. First, for many people, the initial step to trusting God is to cease placing their faith in the state (or vise versa). Second, violent overthrow being out of the question, the best recourse for protection from the state is knowledge of how the state works and forms and, most importantly, faith in God. Finally, when the opportunity presents itself to start anew from the current state, the most prudent course is to rely on God, not the state.
Bibliography


<http://bible.org/netbible>.
