Kingship in Israel, Judah, and the Ancient Near East

Origins of Kingship

small family groups or clans led by elders—particularly popular in nomadic societies—as clans merged to form tribes, or as people from diverse backgrounds began to settle in cities, need for strong, centralized authority increased—this need especially felt when group threatened by another outside group, e.g., another city state led by its own king

two distinct concepts of kingship: (1) hereditary rule, (2) rule of the strongest (charismatic rule)—sometimes these two ideas combined, with short-lived dynasties overthrown by powerful rivals when a weak king came to the throne

person installed as king often a great hero who led people to victory in battle—king seen as one who had special endowments for leadership and communicating with the gods (common in ANE)—Indian (Vedic) legends offer two stories of the origin of kingship: (1) time of insecurity for weak & unlimited power by strong led gods to install a human king; (2) original era of peace & tranquility marred by fall from this idyllic state, leading the gods to install a human king—in both these cases needs of people led to origin of kingship, but established by gods

Egyptians believed kingship had descended from the gods to Menes, the one who united Upper and Lower Egypt—pharaoh (Egyptian for “the king”) considered the embodiment on Horus & Seth, and thus divine himself

Sumerian city-states normally ruled by elders based on majority rule (much like the later Roman senate), but in times of crisis they selected a “king,” who was given absolute authority for the duration of the crisis—the king’s power was relinquished after the crisis passed (much like the authority given a commodore in the British navy during the Napoleonic Wars)

Hebrew designations for king included melek, from verb meaning “to rule, have dominion”; nagid, “prince, ruler”; and mashiach, “anointed one”

Symbols & Titles of the King

symbols associated with king include throne, crown, scepter, royal robe, headdress

also important in many regions was the throne name, the name or names assumed by a king upon his accession—in Egypt the king had five throne names: birth name, royal name, hawk name, serpent name, and name that designated the king as the heir of the power of the gods of the stars—throne names also important in Babylonia, where the Enuma Elish tells of Marduk, king of the gods, being lavished with fifty names, emblematic of his supreme power (cf. the 99 names of Allah in Islam)

throne names used at times in Israel & Judah: Jehoiakim (Eliakim), Jehoahaz (Shallum), Uzziah (Azariah), Solomon (Jedidiah?), David (Elhanan?), Jehoiachin (Jeconiah/Coniah)
kings often anointed with oil as symbol of divine election—may be done privately (usually when a new dynasty is anticipated) or publicly—some kings had both private & public anointings (e.g., Saul, David, Jehu)

**Transmission of Kingship**

two basic patterns: dynastic & charismatic

dynastic kingship has roots in familial-society (homogeneous)—right of primogeniture often assumed but not always practiced—King Telepinus of Hatti regulated the succession to his throne—King Esarhaddon of Assyria installed a crown prince who was not his oldest son—Solomon assumed throne instead of Adonijah, who was older—problem of succession to throne sometimes solved by making one of the king’s sons a coregent

Egyptian rule passed down in matrilineal line, so that oldest daughter of the current queen was the new queen, and her husband (also her brother) was pharaoh—importance of matrilineal connections may play a role in David’s desire to marry Michal, Saul’s daughter, Amnon’s desire for his sister Tamar, Adonijah’s desire for Abishag, and Rehoboam’s marriage to Tamar (daughter of Absalom?)

charismatic has roots in territorial-society (heterogeneous)—explains generally short dynasties of Israel, as opposed to single dynasty of Judah

**Religious Aspects of Kingship**

**God as King**

Marduk crowned king of gods in *Enuma Elish*—in Egypt, Ra considered king of Egypt, even before people were created—in Canaan only El receives the title *mlk*, and he was king of the Canaanite pantheon

**King as God**

sacral kingship: “A religio-political concept by which a ruler is seen as an incarnation, manifestation, mediator, or agent of the sacred or holy (the transcendent or supernatural realm)”—Uppsala School (based at Uppsala University, Sweden) theorized that idea of sacral kingship common to all early ANE cultures & based on idea of cult as ritual drama (myth & ritual school)

three different forms of sacral kingship:

1. king revered as god—some African kings, possibly Menes or other early Egyptian kings—king is life-force of tribe, considered to possess supernatural power—sometimes called chief, medicine man, shaman, or king—as age began to show signs of weakening king, king sometimes ritually killed so that his strength could be passed on to his successor at its maximum efficacy
2. king as divine or semi-divine—Egyptian king identified variously with Horus, the sky-god, or Re/Amon/Aton, the sun-god—later Egyptian theology had god-kingdom spanning two generations, with king ruling as Horus during his lifetime and as Osiris (god of the underworld and father of Horus) after his death—Persian kings identified as incarnations of sun-god or moon-god—kings sometimes considered to be son of a god, either directly (esp. when first king considered a god) or through adoption (e.g., Sargon of Akkad)—affirmation of divine adoption often part of the coronation ceremony—Gilgamesh considered son of goddess Ninsun, Achilles son of goddess Thetis, Keret son of El and Asherah—king sometimes referred to as “image” of god (e.g., Egypt)—myth of divine, supernatural birth, or presence of supernatural phenomena in association with birth, helped legitimize royal claims to divinity (e.g., Romulus, Sargon, Alexander, Augustus)

dead kings & queens often deified, joining the pantheon of the gods, in a form of ancestor worship (e.g., Julius Caesar, Augustus, Livia, etc.)

idea of sacral kingship in Israel primarily of the third type, with king considered agent of God, but idea of king as son of God also present, esp. in Judah—2 Sam 7:14: “I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me”—Ps 2:7: “You are my son; today (i.e., the day the king ascends to the throne) I have begotten you”—many scholars (Gunkel, Mowinckel, Weiser) understand this verse to be speaking of divine adoption of the king—Ps 45:6 is a crux interpretum: speaking to the king, it says, “Your throne, O God, is eternal”—other possible translations, but this one best fits the Masoretic vocalization—another possibility, based on Ugaritic evidence, is “The eternal and everlasting God has enthroned you”

King and Cult

close association of king with gods naturally led to close association of king with cult—kings in early stages of kingship’s development often served as priests as well as kings (cf. the description of Melchizedek as a priest-king of (Jeru)salem)—over time priestly function devolved to specialized priests, & king had largely ceremonial, or perhaps annual, role in cult, at New Year’s festival

king played vital role in Babylonian New Year’s festival (akitu festival)—festival included ritual humiliation of king, in which priest, after taking away his scepter, crown, and sword, slapped the king’s face—this was repeated in the sanctuary, and if his blow drew tears, it was considered a good omen for the coming year—afterwards the king’s symbols of rule returned to him, followed by ceremony of ritual marriage, where king represented Marduk, an act designed to bring good fortune and bountiful crops in the new year—similar festival in Assyria, without ritual humiliation of king
Israel & Judah celebrated Day of Atonement & Feast of Booths at the new year—Mowinckel believes New Year’s festival a celebration of Yahweh’s enthronement, basing his argument in part on several psalms

Saul, David, and Solomon all assume right to offer sacrifices or perform other priestly duties, at least on occasion—probably Jeroboam I as well, who established Israelite sanctuaries

**Domestic Aspects of Kingship**

throughout ANE, king portrayed as responsible for upholding divine justice and to support the rights of widows, the poor, and other powerless groups—“justice” said to be the pillar of the king’s throne in Ps 89:15; 97:2; Prov 16:12; 20:28 (MT reads “covenant faithfulness” here)—Egyptian inscriptions point to ma’at (justice, truth) as foundation of throne—tablet of Assyrian king Ashurbanipal stresses need for king to uphold justice—Canaanite kings sometimes identified as shepet (equivalent to “judges”), and one of their functions to decide cases (cf. Israelite judges and Solomon)—Pss 72 & 101 describe obligations of kings of Israel/Judah to uphold justice