IN SEARCH OF THE HIDDEN STRUCTURE:
YHWH AS KING IN ISAIAH 40-55

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The designation of YHWH as "king" expresses one of the central Israelite notions of God, a notion that was especially important during the period of the first Temple. The concept, however, must have been most problematic during one particular span of time, namely the exilic period. Nevertheless, faith in God as king survived the national catastrophe and the destruction of the Temple. The exilic literature bears ample evidence to this attitude of credo quia absurdum.

Even the Book of Lamentations, this document of despair, confesses tenacious faith in the God whose "throne endures to all generations" (Lam 5:19). The same is true of a number of Psalms that probably date from the Exile, notably Pss 44:5; 74:12; 89:6-19; and 102:13 (cf. also Ps 80:2). In the prophetical literature from the Exile we find an important passage in Ezek 20:32-44 (note v. 33). Although this is the only passage in the book that uses the verb יָרָא, "to reign," about God, the details of the call-narrative in chapter 1 prove beyond doubt that the royal depiction of God was central to Ezekiel.

How, then, is the situation with the exilic Prophet of Consolation in Isaiah 40-55? Do we find the motif of YHWH as king, and if so, what are the basic components of the motif in this Biblical book? One passage immediately comes to the fore:

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How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings . . .
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns [𐤫𐤯𐤐𐤫𐤍𐤙].” (Isa 52:7)³

A passage that should be mentioned alongside Isa 52:7-10 is Isa 40:9-11 describing YHWH as coming הבור מ TORT, “as a strong one,” and הרים, “like a shepherd.” Apart from these two texts we have also got three occurrences of the noun מלך, “king,” referring to God: Isa 41:21; 43:15; and 44:6. Of these 41:21 (“the king of Jacob”) introduces a lawsuit, while 43:15 occurs in a passage (vv. 14-15) that seems to stand fairly unrelated to the surrounding materials (43:8-13, a lawsuit, and 43:16-21, a proclamation of salvation), and finally 44:6 (“the king of Israel”) belongs to a lawsuit passage (vv. 6-8). Genre and contents in these passages contribute little to our understanding of the kingship of YHWH in Isaiah 40-55.

In the ancient Near East, the notion of the kingship of the deity is closely linked up with the idea of the Divine Warrior, who defeats the forces of chaos. The victory over chaos is the act through which the god attains his kingship. The subsequent building of a Temple provides the visible symbol of the royal status of the victorious god; the Temple is the palace of the deity. This tripartite mythopoetic pattern comprised of battle–kingship–palace (Temple), is attested both in Canaan in the Ugaritic myth of Baal and in Mesopotamia in Enuma Elish.⁴

This archaic pattern is also visible, at least in part, in certain lyrical compositions in the Old Testament:

Yet God my King is from of old [ברעה],
working salvation [徉ש התו] in the midst of the earth.
Thou didst divide the sea by thy might;
thou didst break the heads of the dragons on the waters.

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³ The translation quoted in this essay is the RSV.
⁴ For references, see Mettinger, The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies (ConBOT 18; Lund: Gleerup, 1982) 70. For this pattern in the Old Testament, see T. N. D. Mettinger, In Search of God, 92-122, with literature; and note now the thorough treatment by T. Podella (“Der ‘Chaoskampfmythos’ im Alten Testament. Eine Problemanzeige,” in M. Dietrich and O. Loretz [eds.], Mesopotamica—Ugaritica—Biblica [K. Bergerhof Festchrift; AOAT 232; Kevelaer: Butzon, 1993] 283-329, esp. 318) who stresses the same complex of ideas but notes that divine kingship may precede the chaos battle (pp. 302, 319). Podella has a comprehensive bibliography on the notion of the chaos battle, to which I refer the reader.