Some Aspects of the Monarchy in Ancient Israel

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The purpose of the present essay is to illuminate a number of different matters, all of which are united by a common concern with the subject of kingship in ancient Israel.

1 The Coronation Ceremony

Although we have references to the anointing of several kings (e.g. Saul, David, Jehu), we have more detailed descriptions of the coronation ceremony in connection with Solomon and Joash (1 Kgs 1:32–48; 2 Kgs 11:12–20).1 Anointing set aside the king as a sacred person. We cannot be totally sure of the origin of the custom of anointing in ancient Israel. Some scholars have pointed to Egyptian influence, though the Egyptians only anointed officials and Syrian vassals, while others point to the Hittites, who did indeed anoint kings, though their empire ceased long before the founding of the Israelite monarchy.2 However, most likely the custom was borrowed from the Canaanites, who were much closer geographically and culturally to the Israelites. The fragmentary Ugaritic Rephaim text (KTU 1.22.11.15–18) mentions oil in the same context as someone being enthroned, which is suggestive (cf. Judg 9:8, 15).

As I said earlier, we have more detailed descriptions of the coronation ceremony in connection with Solomon and Joash. Interestingly, the two accounts do have several things in common, suggesting that these constituted the basis of a regular ritual. In both the coronation took place in two parts. The first part was in the sanctuary (either the Jerusalem Temple in the case of Joash or by the Gihon spring at the tent sanctuary of the ark in the case of Solomon), where

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2 For these two views see the references cited in John Day, “The Canaanite Background of the Israelite Monarchy,” in King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East, ed. John Day (JSOTSup 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 72–90 (here 80 n. 19).
the king was anointed with oil and acclaimed king (“Long live the king!”) to the sound of a horn or trumpets. The second part was in the palace, where the new king sat on his throne. In addition, there are some details contained in one account rather than the other. In the case of Joash we are told that prior to the anointing he was presented with a crown and the "testimony." Most likely the testimony is the same as the יְדֵיעָה, the “decree” of the Lord, in Ps 2:7. One may compare the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose III, who is said to have received both the crown and the protocol at his coronation. Another interesting detail in connection with Joash’s coronation is in 2 Kgs 11:14, where following the reference to the king’s anointing we read that he stood by the pillar of the temple, as was the custom. The same temple pillar seems to be envisaged in 2 Kgs 23:3, where we read that King Josiah stood by the pillar when he entered into a covenant with Yahweh. The parallel account of Joash’s coronation in 2 Chr 23:13 states that the pillar was at the entrance to the temple. If so, it is likely to have been either the pillar Jachin or Boaz. In the case of Solomon we read that he was led down on David’s mule to the Gihon spring (a sacred spot which must have been associated with a tent sanctuary), where Nathan and Zadok anointed him king (1 Kgs 1:33, 38, 44). We find royalty associated with the mule elsewhere (e.g. Absalom in 2 Sam 18:9).

Since the mule is a cross between a donkey and a horse, it is perhaps appropriate to recall Zech 9:9, where we famously read of the future king riding on a donkey. It is strange that Rex Mason states that there was nothing particularly humble about this, since the verse actually states that the king is “humble and riding on a donkey.” However, this is not to deny that the donkey had a long history in Israel and the ancient Near East as an animal associated with the monarchy. Thus, in 2 Samuel various figures associated with the royal family ride on a donkey (see 2 Sam 16:2; 17:23; 18:9). There is also an interesting verse in Gen 49:11 associating the donkey with the Davidic monarchy. Here, in Jacob’s blessing of Judah, following a clear reference to the Davidic monarchy in v. 10 (“The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet .”), we read of the king, “Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey’s

4 Cf. Robert B.Y. Scott, “The Pillars Jachin and Boaz,” JBL 58 (1939): 143–49, who suggested that Jachin (“he [i.e. Yahweh] shall establish”) and Boaz (or rather בָּעֹז “Strength” in LXX 2 Chr 3:17) were so named because each name was the first word of a dynastic oracle on the pillar in question.