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HEALERS AND SAVIOURS OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN IN PRE-CLASSICAL TIMES

1. "Salvation" in the sense it acquired in some of the "Oriental" religions of the Roman Empire was not a concern of the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, at least before Greek mysticism (Sabbatucci) or "mysteriosophy" (Bianchi) was "invented". Whether such "salvation" ever became a popular concern is a problem that has recently (Teixidor) been discussed, and possibly still should be; but I for one lack the competence to do so.

In the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies of the period indicated, "salvation" meant safety from the three main calamities, i.e. from famine, epidemics, and (defeat in) war, and of course from the other calamity that often ensued as a consequence of the main three, i.e. becoming a slave. After death, there was no "salvation" but, for the common people, at best a vague but not too unhappy survival as a shade; for the king, various types of afterlife that in some cases and in different ways were considered (especially, of course, in Egypt) to be somehow divine.

Now, while the Gods, if well treated, provided safety in life, and the pious continuity in ritual practice on the part of the descendants provided a not too unhappy though of course not exciting afterlife in the realm of the shades, the king was at least in principle the only detainer of expectations of a distinguished Afterlife, as well as a mediator between gods and men and thus in various ways responsible for the welfare of the whole society. He was thus, both during his life and (as Xella has shown for Ugarit in his paper presented to this Colloquium) after his death, a "healer" and a "saviour", in the sense, of course, of "una 'salvezza' che investe i valori terreni più rilevanti, come appunto la salute e l'integrità fisica" (Xella, supra, p. 615); and it is not surprising to note that many have found the roots of what is usually known as "messianism" in Near Eastern kingship ideology.

However, the "sacred", and the "saving", quality of Near Eastern kingship even within its own ideology is more and more a matter of debate. Liverani, who questioned the sacral quality of kingship in Late Bronze Syria, has recently suggested that the "saving" quality of kingship in Mesopotamia and Syria was firmly linked with the concept of royal Justice, that was deified in both areas, and that the main aspect of such royal Justice was the systematic remission of
debts, and freeing of debtors, through royal decrees often in connection with new accessions. In the Late Bronze Age there were no more such decrees; social differences and conflicts increased, while consensus to kingship and social cohesion diminished.

The beginning of the Iron Age meant no less than the total collapse of the whole social and political system of the Eastern Mediterranean, from Mycenae to Egypt. This was an internal social phenomenon, and even the "invasions" that we usually connect with the beginning of the Iron Age are in reality increasingly interpreted as social upheavals. In F. M. Heichelheim's words:

"the storms of the beginning of the Iron Age not only undermined the money system, the system of trade, the strategy, and the political organization of the Ancient Orient. They had an even more lasting effect because Ancient Oriental kingship itself was no longer the strongest guarantee for the survival of civilization and lasting political power (my italics, C.G.). Soon, and especially after the development of the Hellenic states to polis civilizations, it even had no longer any cultural advantage. The foundations of the spiritual and material organization of the Ancient Orient had been rendered unsafe to the last degree by...structural changes. All the attempts at a comeback made by the Egyptian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Persian kingdoms had to remain ineffectual in the end".

The transition between the Late Bronze and the Iron Age was thus a period of collapse, in some areas, and of profound crisis, in others, for the complex mode of production that Heichelheim calls the Ancient Oriental Pattern.

The collapse took place in a more violent way in Palestine and in Greece:

in Palestine where after the fall (or rather: during the fall) of the Bronze Age kingdoms a tribal society (Israel) emerged, only to be rapidly reorganized in the shape of a "national" monarchy that was different from the old Bronze Age pattern, as Buccellati has shown; and in Greece where the Mycenaean palaces and their culture were destroyed, and after a "dark period" we know little about, society reshaped itself as a series of free townships, not ruled by monarchs.

In both areas, crisis was endemic for all the first half of the first millennium; and though Greece and Israel were extremely different from each other, yet they produced the first cultures (and the only ones in the Mediterranean before Rome) expressed by texts not thought and written by palace bureaucracies.

In those texts of a new type, the king is present, but not central; and new charismatic figures are present, not royal, often in conflict with monarchs, and always endowed with special powers that enable them to