Who were the Advisers of the King?
A Comparative Study of Royal Consultants in Mesopotamia and in Israel

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1 Advisers in Supreme Wisdom

I am greatly honoured to have this opportunity to contribute to the celebration of John Collins. He has encouraged me and inspired me in our long scholarly life. There have been disagreements, sometimes when it comes to comparative studies. This study is not aimed at tracing lines of dependencies between sources, but simply to read sources in the same cultural environment together in order to sharpen our eyes for new insight. I hope John Collins will enjoy it.

From a modern perspective, it is self-evident that a ruler needed advisers to organize and administer his kingdom. These advisers administered different sectors of the society and they were the consultants of the king in cases where the king was in need of special counsel. In Mesopotamia, we observe a complex organization of the main civil and political institutions with a huge bureaucracy, both on the national level and in relation to each individual city.1

In the Hebrew Bible, we find lists of high officials connected to the earliest history of Israel.2 In the depiction of the kingdom of David the lists are relatively sparse (2 Sam 8:16–18; cf. also 2 Sam 20:23–26). When we move to the kingdom of Solomon, the list has increased considerably, due ostensibly to the expansion of his kingdom (1 Kgs 4:1–7).

The king’s need for officials and consultants did not diminish his eminence. Even though the king in Babylonia was not generally considered to be divine, he was a special kind of human being, endowed with the capacity to communicate with the divine.3 We find one of the most illuminating illustrations

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3 Old Babylonian kings generally claimed divine parentage, but this divine origin did not automatically make them gods. It attributed to them an aura of divinity, but only a few kings were actually deified; cf. Åke W. Sjöberg, “Die göttliche Abstammung der sumerisch-babylonischen Herrscher,” *OrSuec* 21 (1972): 87–112; William W. Hallo, “The Birth of Kings,” in *Love and Death*
of how the king was regarded in the first millennium in the text labelled the *Creation of Humankind and the King.* Here the king is created separately from ordinary human beings, given the royal insignia from the gods, and given access to the counsel of the gods.

In the Hebrew Bible, Solomon is proverbial for his wisdom (1 Kgs 3:12; 5:9–10 [Eng. 4:29–30]). The wisdom of the king is also in the forefront in the ideal images of the king. In Isa 9:6 he is given the throne names “He who counsels/plans wonder, God the hero, everlasting father, prince of peace, great in authority.” Isaiah 11:2 states: “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

Every king would approach his god(s), praying for wisdom. However, the wisdom described above is more than human wisdom endowed by the gods. It requires a communication with the gods where the king participates in the divine wisdom. The king needed assistance to enter into this kind of communication.

We know the conditions best at the Assyrian royal court due to the numerous letters from experts, *ummanus,* to the kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. The letters reveal a continuous communication between the kings and the experts on the matter of how to interpret the signs of the