



“Our Eyes Will See the Beauty of the King”: The Esthetics of Kingship

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EVER SINCE MIRIAM AND MOSES FIRST SANG THEIR VICTORY SONG ON THE DRY side of the sea, God has been worshiped as the king of Israel and of the church (Exod 15:18). The covenant at the mountain during the wilderness sojourn is predicated on the notion of Yahweh’s suzerainty (Exod 19:1-6). The resistance to a human kingship during the Tribal League is rooted in the long-held insistence that there is no king for Israel but Yahweh, certainly not a human being (Judg 8:22-23). When Israel finally does move toward the acceptance of the monarchy with all its implications, the human ruler was understood to be merely the appointee and agent of the divine king (Deut 17:15; Ps 2:4-6). Israel’s prophets derived their authority and message from having stood in the presence of the deity in the royal court of God (Jer 23:16-22; 1 Kgs 22:19-23). Jesus’ ministry begins and ends with the announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand (Matt 1:1; 2:2; 27:11-12). The heavenly throne room with the Lamb seated at God’s right hand provides our

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Although legitimately under criticism, the metaphor “God is king” proclaims an indispensable aspect of biblical and Isaianic theology.

final glimpse of the promise of the hope of the world to come (Rev 22:3). The kingship of God is early, pervasive, and eternal in the biblical witness.

I. GOD AS KING

Of all the biblical passages portraying the divine king, Isa 6:1-13 is probably the most preached on. It certainly provides the preacher with the most vivid description in all of scripture of the enthroned deity. In this vision Yahweh is undeniably the Holy One of Israel, the one God set apart from all other gods and human rulers as well. Isaiah's prophetic call comes to him as he sees Yahweh sitting on a high and lofty throne, the hem of God's robe filling the temple (Isa 6:1-13). In royal iconography, seraphim (winged cobras) are charged with standing protective watch over gods and kings. But, before Yahweh, king of Israel, they abandon their protective function, covering themselves instead in order to hide their vulnerability and protect themselves from the awesome figure of the enthroned God. Isaiah's confession that he is a mere human being, one of unclean lips, becomes clear to him as he hears the seraphim call to one another in the smoke-filled room, "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of Hosts; the whole earth is filled with God's glory" (Isa 6:3). This view of the divine king impresses upon the prophet the corruptibility of his own human nature. His only response is to cry out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the king, Yahweh of hosts" (6:5)!

This theology of divine kingship provides abundant imagery and inexhaustible insights for preaching. The preached ideal of God as king has the potential to offer comfort and reassurance for the present life, the promise of justice and righteousness in a world sadly lacking in dignity, ultimate victory over the defeats of life, and the hope of the world to come.

II. A FAULTY METAPHOR?

Nevertheless, due to legitimate concerns centered on hierarchy and hierarchical language, this theology of divine kingship and the kingdom of God has fallen out of common use in contemporary worship. As rich and visual as this biblical theology of the kingship of God may be, kings and kingdoms are no longer a part of the post-modern, democratic, individualistic worldview. Kings and their realms have come to represent an ancient idea that evokes images of absolute monarchs holding absolute sway over helpless subjects. But beyond the archaic language and outdated political realities, the language of divine kingship and kingdom has been subjected to a more serious theological critique. Speaking of the deity in these masculine and hierarchical terms can be a genuine deterrent to preaching on such texts. Women especially have spoken of the pain of feeling excluded in worship when language continues to be a barrier to full participation in the life of the community. They have legitimately cried out in confusion as Christianity has held up its inherent promise of inclusivity, even as it is spoken in exclusive language, ad-

addressing the congregation as “men of God” and “brothers in Christ.” Being told that one is created in the image of God can ring hollow when the images of God lifted up for the community are exclusively masculine.

A positive result is that, of late, when speaking about humanity and God, language is becoming more precise. Previously, the gender specific “man” served as the inclusive term referring to “humanity,” its welcome replacement. For many, then, this notion of the enthroned male deity is a serious impediment to faith and worship. Representative of this widely held view is the work of Rita Nakashima Brock, who articulates the notion that Christian theology has reproduced oppressive patriarchal and power structures “both through almost exclusively masculine symbols such as father, king, lord, and savior and through theological doctrines of omnipotence, divine *apatheia*, judgment, and reason.”¹ The language of divine kingship and the kingdom of God has become, at best, an archaic idea or, at worst, an oppressive category.

One response has been the avoidance of the offending word itself, replacing it with a more comfortable ascription, such as “God.” Thus, the well-known hymn,

Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven;
To his feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Evermore His praises sing: Alleluia, alleluia!
Praise the everlasting King!²

has been changed to,

Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven,
Glad of heart your carols raise;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who, like me, should sing God’s praise? Alleluia, Alleluia!
Praise the Maker all your days!³

Yet, eliminating the language of kingship changes the hymn, since the notion of kingship is descriptive, speaking to God’s attributes and the nature of God’s working in the world. The word God is not descriptive in that sense and cannot add to our understanding of God’s purposes for humanity, the church, and the world. This replacement provides a type of relief at the expense of emptying the hymn of a measure of theological content.

A related solution has again replaced kingdom language, but with a more egalitarian political term, such as commonwealth. Here, the offending kingdom of God is modified into a place where each self-governing person is drawn into union with God. Each is given a measure of autonomy and independence that is in line with our modern democratic principles. In this commonwealth metaphor, God is

¹Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 49.

²As found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, 1990; text by Henry Francis Lyte, 1834.

³As adapted for the Ecumenical Women’s Center, 1974.

less demanding than in the kingship metaphor and much more readily available as a counselor or advisor, who is with one through joys and sorrows. While clearly a comforting image, the commonwealth of God is diametrically opposed to the portrait of the relationship between God and humanity that is set forth in scripture.

III. REDEEMING KINGSHIP

It is at this very point that one aspect of Isaiah's theology of divine kingship may help to redeem this idiom for the preacher and provide us with a way of talking about kingship in our contemporary context. As noted above, for Isaiah, Yahweh is the great king, enthroned above the cherubim throne. The grandness of Isaiah's vision of the great king is in stark contrast to the divine messenger's bleak call, one that will go unheeded, except by but a very few (6:13). Isaiah's call is to preach to a people who will not comprehend, whose minds will be dull, their eyes shut and ears stopped (6:9-10).

Except at 6:5, where Isaiah cries out, "My eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of Hosts," the prophet reserves the appellative מֶלֶךְ, "king," for the reigning Davidic monarch, along with the kings of Assyria, Babylon, Ethiopia, Arpad, and Hamat, all objects of Yahweh's wrath. Instead of addressing Yahweh as king, Isaiah signals the incomparability of the deity through the use of אֲדֹנָי, "my master" (6:1, 8). In distinction to אֲדֹנָי, "my master," used of human superiors, including the human king, אֲדֹנָי is used exclusively of God as the all-powerful master.⁴ God was called "master" by royal analogy, and אֲדֹנָי, "my master," was used when speaking to God or by the prophet speaking for God as an expression of royal power. "This aspect was seen as so significant that *adonai*, 'my master,' became the standard surrogate for the tetragrammaton during the Second Temple period."⁵ Thus Isaiah clearly distinguishes between the divine king and any human king.

The basis for this distinction may be seen in Isaiah's critique of both Jerusalem and the Davidic king of his time. Isaiah's complaint against eighth-century Jerusalem is that the divinely chosen city is unfaithful, selling itself to baser wants and desires. Jerusalem, the city of the Davidic monarch and Yahweh's chosen dwelling place forever (2 Samuel 7; Ps 132:13-18), has become unclean (Isa 1:21-23). The once faithful city, filled with justice and righteousness, is now the home of murderers, corrupt public officials, and unjust stewards of God's gifts. The ultimate judgment against the city is that within its walls there is no one who defends the cause of the widow and the orphan. Therefore, says *Adonai* Yahweh of Hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, the city will be burned and purged, the dross smelted away, only to be restored (Isa 1:24-26). It is time for a thorough housecleaning. Yahweh will not live in a dirty house.

⁴"*Adonai* should be understood as a frozen form of the first person singular suffix attached to the plural of majesty," which may have been used as a vocative, "O, my (powerful) master." It appears 134 times in the Old Testament, being used by Isaiah of Jerusalem 34 times: Marc Z. Brettler, *God Is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 76 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989) 41-42.

⁵Ibid., 43-44.

Isaiah describes Yahweh as a king whose reign is founded on justice and righteousness. Yahweh is the king whose throne is high and lifted up, whose kingship is exalted by justice, the holy God who is shown to be holy by righteousness (Isa 5:16). These are the qualities that the great king not only requires of the people and of the city, but will also bring about through purging. Afterward Jerusalem will be called the city of righteousness and the faithful city. It shall be redeemed by justice and those within who repent will be saved by righteousness (Isa 1:26-27).

Yahweh is a king who demands justice and righteousness from the holy city and from its inhabitants. This is the royal ideal, not only in the theology of Isaiah, but normative throughout the Old Testament.⁶ Psalm 72 is a prayer for God’s guidance and support of the human king. Its petition is that the royal ideal, exemplified in the divine king, may be bestowed upon the human king, on behalf of God’s people.

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s heir. May the king judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice....May the king defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. (Ps 72:1, 2, 4)

A king who rules by this ideal will have a successful reign. Nature will flourish and be in abundance, the king will rule over all the earth, the enemies of the people will bow before this righteous earthly king, the one who “delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper, who has pity on the weak and saves the needy” (Ps 72:12-13).

Isaiah lifts up the royal ideal in his vision of the messianic king. This future king, empowered by God, “will not judge by what the eyes see, or decide by what the ears hear; but with righteousness shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isa 11:3-4). All of nature will be in harmony as even the domestic animals and fierce predators find a resting place together, free from the fear of violent death. Even young children will be saved from premature death. Under this ideal rule there will be no more violence or hurt on God’s holy mountain, for “the whole earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh, as the waters cover the sea” (Isa 11:6-9).

As Isaiah makes clear when speaking of eighth-century Jerusalem and as anyone who has lived very long in any land can testify, human kingship falls far short of the ideal expressed in Psalm 72. Isaiah indicts not only the people of Jerusalem, but also its leadership, saving his harshest critique for the king, referring sarcasti-

⁶The kingship ideal is not a notion unique to Israel. Its emphasis on the establishment of justice and righteousness as a gift from the gods is old and found throughout the ancient near east. Hammurabi, the eighteenth-century B.C. king of Babylon, in erecting his famous law code, expresses this ideal visually and verbally. At the top of the famous law code stele, Hammurabi is depicted standing before Shamash, god of justice, receiving the command to write the book of Babylon’s laws. Beneath this representation, Hammurabi directly states that the gods, Anu and Enlil, kings of heaven and earth, gave him an enduring kingship that he might act as their earthly representative. Hammurabi was commissioned to “promote the welfare of the people,” to assure that justice prevailed in the land, and “to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak.”

cally to Ahaz as the “House of David” (7:2, 13). Brock’s and others’ concerns for the oppressive nature of kingship language is a point well taken, rooted in experience and history. Human kingship has abused and misused the divine mandate to work for justice and righteousness, moving instead against the poor and the weak, establishing structures of oppressive power and systems of self-aggrandizement.⁷

The critique of kingship is based, however, on the human model, which, given human nature, is doomed to failure without the help of God. Scripture itself testifies to the high ideal of human kingship, modeled on the divine ideal, run amuck in excesses of power and avarice. This is where the good news of the gospel is most effective. God is redeemer, come in human form, the servant king, who breaks down the established powers and reinstitutes justice and righteousness for an enslaved humanity.⁸ Brock acknowledges that “at times the unconventional use of male-dominant images has shattered their hierarchical hold by a transmutation of the image into its opposite, for example, when the messianic king becomes a servant.” As hopeful as she would like to see this reversal, she still finds the model too steeped in its “patriarchal legacy, symbol systems of hierarchical and oppressive societies.” They have not often enough brought liberation.

Their failure to be fully realized does not alter the ideal lifted up in scripture. Human kings are finite, they lack the requisite wisdom and power necessary to fulfill the divine mandate to rule with perfect justice and righteousness. This limitation does not extend to God. The kingship of God is qualitatively different from human kingship, and must be distinguished as such. God is the perfect king, endowed with wisdom to rule judiciously, introducing justice and order where the world has created injustice and chaos. Not only is God imbued with the wisdom to rule, God possesses the requisite power to carry out these judgments and right the world’s wrongs.

All language is inadequate for describing the nature, qualities, and attributes of God. Brock is correct when she asserts that “God is king” is a metaphor drawn from the human sphere and that, as such, it is deficient. In response, it should be reminded that a metaphor is limited, neither meant nor able to carry the full weight of meaning. A metaphor cannot provide complete correspondence. All language breaks down at this point. “Furthermore, since by its very nature a metaphor ‘A is B’ does not imply that A and B are the same in all respects, the use of metaphorical language of God does not conflict with the notion of God’s incomparability.”⁹ Moreover, despite its deficiencies, the metaphor “God is king” bears important theological freight. The fundamental relationship between God and humans is not

⁷Kingship is not the only form of oppressive power. Any form of human government unredeemed by God falls short of its ideal and tends to become oppressive.

⁸Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 49.

⁹While the Old Testament necessarily uses metaphor and language drawn from human experience, some idioms reflect the understanding that God is incomparable. For example, as mentioned above, מֶלֶךְ is used only of God as king, never of the human counterpart. Brettler, *God Is King*, 159.

one of equals, as Isaiah's vision makes abundantly clear. By casually changing the language or eliminating it, its essential theological content is lost.

The substitution of commonwealth for kingdom language is inaccurate because it masks the distance between God and humans. The language of divine kingship, even with the chasm between God and humanity, is in itself liberating, because it offers identity and purpose. Isaiah's criticism of Jerusalem is drawn from the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant. Acting as God's prosecuting attorney, the prophet calls the heavens and the earth to hear the charges against Yahweh's people. Although they have been reared as the very children of Yahweh, they have rebelled, denying livelihood to the widow, the orphan, the poor. The inhabitants of Jerusalem have forsaken Yahweh and despised the Holy One of Israel. The spoil of the poor is found in the houses of the rich (Isa 1:2-17; 3:13-17). This relationship between God and God's people is exemplified in the conditional nature of the Mosaic covenant. Modeled after ancient near eastern treaties, the covenant relies on the gracious acts of a great king, the suzerain, as a motivation for the obedience of the vassal. The disparity of power between the suzerain and the vassal does not relegate the vassal to heteronomous status. As Jon Levenson argues,

The covenant that specifies this obedience must not be confused with the bill of sale of a slave or a statement of unconditional surrender on the part of the vassal. Indeed, the very choice of the covenant document as the metaphor by which to render this delicate relationship evidences the free will with which Israel enters into the new arrangement. The bilateral character of the suzerainty treaty underscores the freedom and dignity of the lesser partner even within the new relationship of fealty to his lord. That this vassal is himself a king makes the same point. Through covenant the people Israel steps into a position that is fundamentally royal in nature. Her obligation to serve does not compromise her majesty; indeed, it defines it. It is obedience in covenant that confers upon Israel the status of God's "treasured possession among all the peoples...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹⁰

While striving for a world in which each self-governing person is drawn into union with God, we are called to recognize God's royal claim upon us. We cannot ignore the requirement that there is One to whom we owe ultimate allegiance. Kingship and kingdom language is essential in expressing that idea. Within that covenant relationship in God's kingdom we are given our own identity and dignity, "For you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). Human kingship may be oppressive, but a true vision of the divine king is anything but oppressive—it is a vision of redemptive beauty:

Your eyes will see the beauty of the king; they will behold a land that stretches far away. Your mind will muse on the terror: "Where is the one who counted?"

¹⁰Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 141.

Where is the one who weighed the tribute? Where is the one who counted the towers?" No longer will you see the insolent people, the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend, stammering in a language that you cannot understand. Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be pulled up, and none of whose ropes will be broken. But there Yahweh in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor stately ship can pass. For Yahweh is our judge, Yahweh is our ruler, Yahweh is our king; Yahweh will save us. Your rigging hangs loose; it cannot hold the mast firm in its place, or keep the sail spread out. Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided; even the lame will fall to plundering. And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick"; the people who live there will be forgiven their iniquity. (Isa 33:17-24) ⊕