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King of Kings: The Enthronement of Yahweh

Jeremy J. Stewart

Ancient Near Eastern kingship had a profound influence on Israelite kingship. The Israelites eventually enthroned their God, Yahweh, as well as their future Messiah. This led to the enthronement of Jesus Christ by His followers, an observance and a tradition that continues until the present.

The motif of God and Jesus Christ sitting upon heavenly thrones is a common image in Christian theology. How and where did this tradition begin? What is the relationship between deity and kingship, and how did God end up ruling in a man-made governmental position?

From the time of Adam to Abraham, pastoral nomadism and local tribal leadership was essentially all that was known throughout the ancient Near East. A new form of government emerged from this tradition that would influence the politics, social structure, and theology of each of the civilizations that it reached. Kingship and monarchic politics spread throughout the Middle East and gave rise to new beliefs and ideals, including that of divine kingship. Ancient Israel was no exception to this movement. Influenced by its Mesopotamian, Transjordanian, and especially Egyptian neighbors, ancient Israel’s newfound sedentary civilization not only adopted kingship as the official form of government, but likewise integrated many of the derived aspects

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of royal politics into their own religion. Perhaps none of these changes carries the magnitude of the eventual enthronement of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The ideology that arose from Israelite kingship inspired and shaped everything from messianic beliefs to modern religions. A study of ancient kingship in the Middle East thus enhances our understanding and appreciation for the kingship of God and the heavenly reign of Jesus Christ.

Kingship in the Ancient Near East

Ancient Near Eastern kingship has its roots in the development of the position of the father, or elder, of a clan or tribe. Without executive backing or sufficient organization to amass real authority, the power of these leaders was limited to moral influence, without extensive rights to make or enforce laws. The role of the elder of the clan “was to guide rather than to dictate the conduct of his free subjects, to declare what was just rather than to enforce it.”¹ These leaders began to consolidate their power, giving birth to the limited monarchy. The authority and prestige of the tribal leaders increased, and they soon began to resemble the modern perception of a kingly figure. Although these kings had authority to make and enforce laws and were often seen as the supreme judge, their power remained fragile, resting in the hands of their subjects—a force over which they had very little control. Despite this progress towards royal rule, the authority of the king would continue to evolve drastically before it reached the status of absolutism.

From this point the monarchies of the ancient Near East can be categorized under three groups. The petty kings of the Canaanite city-states represent the weakest of the three. These

¹ W. Robertson Smith, The Religion of the Semites (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901), 62. “In Aramaic the root ܟܠܡ (from which the common Semitic word for “king” is derived) means ‘to advise’; and in Arabic the word ܐܡܝܪ, ‘commander,’ ‘prince,’ also means ‘adviser.’”
kings were often “of foreign origin and ruled, with the support of a military aristocracy, over the population of the city-state.” Their range of influence and power fluctuated widely. In the Canaanite Uragitic documents, for example, the former kings “were recognized as demigods.” The kings of Northern Syria, in contrast, were regarded merely as human beings.

A second form of kingship can be seen among the Transjordanian peoples. Theirs was a nationalistic form of kingship, in which a king led and was supported by the native military. These kings’ rule depended on the success and loyalty of their armies.

The third and most powerful form of kingship was found predominantly in the regions of Mesopotamia and Egypt, where kingship “was regarded as a political order divinely ordained for the good of the empire.” Under this model the concept of kingship jumped from secular to sacral, and the kings were “regarded as being[s] endowed with divine talents and enjoying a special relationship with the deity.” The Mesopotamians, for example, believed their king to be superhuman and divine, ordained to maintain the rule of the gods. Although he was not thought to be the literal son of the gods, he became their offspring through adoption. This divine election afforded the king immense power and elevated him to a divine status, and yet his divinity was strictly functional, unlike the Egyptian pharaoh’s metaphysical endowment.

Nowhere in the Middle East was monarchic rule so well established and defined as it was in Egypt. The idea of kingship was intertwined throughout the entire Egyptian theology, for the pharaoh was the god’s ka, his first-born. “The Egyptian pharaoh

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 3:11.
was believed to have been the offspring of Ra and worshipped as the incarnation of Horus, Osiris, and Seth.”6 As such, he was responsible for maintaining ma’at, the order of the universe, which had been established by his father, Ra, during the creation. As the “Lord of ma’at,” pharaoh contended against the powers of chaos, powers that prevailed from the time of a pharaoh’s death until the ascension of his successor. Pharaoh was “the absolute lawgiver . . . the very source of justice . . . the giver of life, sustainer of fertility, and dispenser of abundant blessing. The Egyptian kings, being divine, were worshiped in their life and death.”7 They also enjoyed a special relationship with the gods, were regarded as priest-kings, and made offerings for the living and the dead.8

Another important phenomenon developed with the spread of kingship throughout the Near East, namely the ideology that deity, as the bestower of earthly kings’ power, was actually the ultimate king. “Among the Semitic peoples which got beyond the mere tribal stage and developed a tolerably organized state, the supreme deity was habitually thought of as king.”9 Although this heavenly king was believed to be the ultimate ruler, “divine sovereignty was conceived as a kingship precisely similar to human kingship.”10 The god-king shared the same attributes, benefits, and especially responsibilities as the earthly king. “What the Semitic communities asked, and believed themselves to receive, from their god as king lay mainly in three things: help against their enemies, counsel by oracles or soothsayers in matters of national difficulty, and a sentence of justice when a case was too hard for human decision.”11 Thus we begin to see the

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6 Ibid., 45.
7 Buttrick, 3:14.
9 Smith, 66.
10 Ibid., 62.
11 Ibid., 64.
enthronement of gods, such as Ra in Egypt, and El and Ba’al in Canaan,\textsuperscript{12} as well as many others.

**Enthronement Ceremonies**

One of the most intriguing aspects to emerge from the kingship tradition is the development of enthronement ceremonies. Each monarchy had its own rituals and procedures that installed the new king on the throne, yet these rites varied only slightly from one civilization to the next. Most of the ceremonies were applied to the ascension to the throne of both a new king and the local god, and most contain common elements such as crowns, thrones, scepters, hymns, namings, and anointings. In order to more fully understand these ancient enthronement rituals, let us look specifically at the traditions and customs surrounding these ceremonies in ancient Egypt.

Three main sources shed light on the enthronement ceremonies of ancient Egypt: the temple reliefs of the New Kingdom,\textsuperscript{13} certain Pyramid Texts, and the so-called “Mystery Play of the Succession.” I will focus briefly on the latter.

A textbook example of Egyptian enthronement ceremonies is preserved in a large papyrus, “The Mystery Play of Succession,”


\textsuperscript{13} A wonderful example of Egyptian enthronement ceremonies is found on the walls of Queen Hatshepsut’s temple at Deir el Bahri. Following the birth scenes, we find what we assume to be the most important elements of her enthronement. The reliefs begin with Amon and Harakhte purifying her, and “then Amon, holding a young prince [sic] on his knee, confronts the assembly of the gods,” to whom Hatshepsut is presented. These acknowledge her as the daughter of god, Amon, and wish her well on her journey. She is next shown traveling with her father, Thotmes I, who presents the new king before the people. She was received with great favor, and they “proclaimed the royal names of the new Pharaoh.” Shouts were given of her divinity, as well as pleas that she would live eternally, and then “they groveled at her feet; they prostrated themselves at her royal command.” Queen Hatshepsut is then depicted receiving new names from the priests, being crowned with the white crown of the South and the red crown
which “is the actual ‘script’ of a play performed at the accession of Senusert I.”

The play dates to 2000 B.C., and was probably performed anew for the enthronement of each successive king. Actors in the play included the king, royal princes, court officials, priests, and relatives of the king. It was imperative that the kings begin their rule with this play, for “the king was not properly king unless he had enacted the Play of the Succession at various cities.”

This enthronement play was not thought to be merely a make-believe or reenactment play, but a ceremony that “had some virtue or power in itself,” thereby bestowing power upon the new king.

Much work went into the preparation of the ceremony. Priests would prepare the accessories and gather the royal insignia, including scepters, crowns, clothing, etc. The prince was delivered to the temple, where he received his new “crown-prince name.” Anointings, hymns, and prayers began the ceremony. As the play commenced and the king was “initiated into the solemn mystery of the divine things,” the scenes changed “from Paradise to heaven and next, perhaps, to the field where Adam was condemned to labor after the fall.”

One observer of the cer-

of the North, and robed with “a great mantle upon her shoulders.” All of these events served as a purification, a preparation for the actual enthronement, “which will take place on the next New Year’s Day.” This ceremony is the climax of the coronation, and is accompanied by special hymns, allusions to the creation of the earth, and a “text [that] ends with a prayer on behalf of the new king.” With all of these events now fulfilled, the “new queen is led in great pomp to Amon, her celestial father, who embraces her, and she enter . . .,” now enthroned and endowed with all power. Compare Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (California: Scholars, 1980), 10, 25, 38, 84-85, 106–108; Alexandre Moret, *Kings and Gods of Egypt* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker, 1912), 24–26.

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14 Frankfort, 123.
15 Ibid., 124.
16 Ibid.
18 Frankfort, 125.
19 Ibid., 124.
mony spoke of the sacredness and complexity of the play, stating “that there is much dressing and undressing of the king, with many sacred robes and insignia.”\textsuperscript{20} Just prior to the actual coronation of the new king, a pillar, known as the \textit{Djed} (or dd) pillar was erected. “In its nature and origin the dd pillar is no doubt the leafless tree, the tree or plant of life,”\textsuperscript{21} which was a representation of the new king, as well as Osiris, the god of vegetation. The ceremony associated with the raising of this pillar was “part of the rites of royalty and probably serves as a symbol of rebirth and resurrection.”\textsuperscript{22}

At this point the climax of the ceremony—the actual enthronement and coronation—took place. A sacrifice was offered by the priests of both the Upper and Lower Kingdoms, who then approached the new king. They placed a gold headband on his head, the last anointing was performed, and the newly enthroned king broke bread and gave it to them before taking his own meal. This feast was directly related to both the enthronement ceremony and the New Year Festival, “and was also especially celebrated in connection with the consecration of temples.”\textsuperscript{23} It has also been suggested that a shortened and simplified version of this ceremony may have been performed at jubilee festivals, and in the daily cult, where the king served as the high priest.\textsuperscript{24}

Egyptian enthronement ceremonies, such as the one just outlined, vary slightly from one to the next, however, all have common elements. Namings, for example, play a crucial role in the elevation of the prince to the role of king and god. Although the common number of throne names rested at five, there was no limit to the number of names taken by kings and gods, for power

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{21} Engnell, 10. As a hieroglyph this pillar represents Osiris, with meanings ranging from eternal life and immortality to “a special form of the ladder of heaven well-known to comparative religion.”
\textsuperscript{22} Frankfort, 128.
\textsuperscript{23} Engnell, 10.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 5.
and richness directly corresponded with the abundance of appellations. That the gods similarly had secret names is evidenced in the New Kingdom story of Isis and Ra. The great magician goddess Isis, as the opponent to the sun god, Ra, was said to know everything—everything, that is, “except the sun god’s (true) name.” Egyptians considered this to be the most secret thing of all. Isis, through evil schemes, tricked Ra into revealing his real name. These secret names were given only to the kings. Upon their reception the kings were prohibited to ever pronounce them. “It is said of the deceased king at the end of his journey to the sky, when he appears among the gods as the highest god, that ‘his mother does not know his name’; like the sun god before he was tricked, the deceased king shares with no one the knowledge of his name.”

Another prevalent aspect of Egyptian enthronements concerns the common stages in the ceremonies. Three stages are prevalent in ancient Near Eastern, and especially in Egyptian, enthronement ceremonies. These three stages are: “(1) the elevation of the new king to divine status; (2) his presentation to the gods of the pantheon; (3) his enthronement and reception of kingly power.” The above-outlined Egyptian enthronement was patterned around these three steps and, as we will see, this pattern also reached ancient Israel where it shaped both secular and sacred enthronement ideals.

Kingship in Israel

When Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt they left a world that revolved around divine kingship. With plagues and tumbling waters, Yahweh, the God of Israel, proved Himself to be

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26 Ibid.
the King over all the other gods. Israel’s natural reaction was to crown its God: “The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. For the horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea, and the Lord brought again the waters of the sea upon them; but the children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea” (Exod. 15:18–19). The reply of Yahweh, the newly enthroned god-king, came to His people in the form of a covenant: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exod. 19:6, italics added.). This recognition of Yahweh as king, of course, was in a religious context. This meant that any deviation from the covenant with their god would lead Israel into complete anarchy (Judg. 21:25), for they had not yet established an earthly king to enforce their laws.

Israel’s first attempt to introduce earthly kingship into their nation was with Gideon, after he had proven victorious against the raiding Midianites. In Egypt (as well as in other places surrounding Israel) a victory over another nation, and especially the deliverance of the people, gave the conqueror a right to the throne. This explains Israel’s reaction as they pleaded with Gideon: “Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son’s son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian” (Judg. 8:22). Gideon’s response, however, shows the degree to which he recognized Yahweh as the only rightful king. He reminds the Israelites, “I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you” (Judg. 8:23). The institutionalization of kingship in Israel, however, would be realized in the near future.

The path to kingship in Israel was forged by the slow settlement of the tribes and nomadic peoples into a sedentary civilization. The final impetus, however, was the desperate political situation in which they found themselves.
“In the time of Samuel, the Israelites were under a heavy Philistine yoke (1 Sam. 13:19–21); some of the territories, which had escaped the Philistine overlordship, suffered repeatedly under other onslaughts brought about by the Transjordanian Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:1-2) and the inroads of foraying nomads such as the Amalekites (1 Sam. 14:48). Thus, the introduction of kingship was a historical necessity.”

The prophet Samuel certainly didn’t feel that it was necessary for Israel to have a king. Upon their request he rehearsed to them the nature and evils of kingly rule, but finally consented, signing the ordeal off as an apostasy and rejection of the Lord as king (1 Sam. 8:4–22). The Lord appointed Saul to be Israel’s new ruler and Samuel accordingly anointed Saul as king over Israel (1 Sam. 10)29.

Such kingly characteristics as divine appointment, anointing, and military rule, demonstrate that Israelite kingship closely resembled the rule of its neighboring nations. “There is considerable evidence for Israel to suggest that the bureaucracy was modeled upon Egyptian patterns.”30 One major difference demands mention: Unlike the metaphysical, mythological nature of the Egyptian king, the Israelite king was not worshipped by his subjects, but remained a vassal to the Heavenly King. There did exist, howbeit, a special father-son relationship between Yahweh and those who were enthroned, which directly corresponded with the Egyptian model. The Lord declared, “I will be his father, and he shall be my son,” (2 Sam. 7:14) and recapitulated later with “Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee” (Ps. 2:7). As part of this covenant Yahweh also promised King David that his house and his kingdom would be established forever, thereby establishing the kingly line of Israel.

28 Buttrick, 3:12.

29 It is interesting to note that in I Sam. 11:12–15, after Saul’s first victory as king, they “renewed the kingdom,” “made Saul king before he Lord,” and “sacrificed sacrifices of peace offerings before the Lord.”

It is difficult to fully reconstruct the rituals surrounding the enthronement ceremonies of ancient Israel due to the limited details found in the Old Testament. The accounts of the enthronements of Solomon (1 Kings 1:32–40) and Joash (2 Kings 11:4–20) do offer some insights, especially in showing that the Israelite enthronement ceremonies followed the basic three-stage pattern prescribed earlier: First, they were elevated to a divine status through anointings and pronouncements; second, not only were they presented before the gods, but they were chosen by God Himself and then presented to the people; and finally the new king was enthroned and received kingly power. A closer inspection of the aforementioned kingly coronations will help to validate this point, as well as shed some light on the subject of Israelite enthronement ceremonies.

Solomon’s enthronement began with him riding upon his father’s mule to the Gihon Spring (1 Kings 1:33–38). He was accompanied by prophets, priests, and foreign mercenaries (v. 44). After arriving at Gihon, Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet took a horn of holy oil from the tabernacle and anointed Solomon king (vv. 34, 39, 45). “The most essential part of the enthronement ceremony was the anointment of the king, and the less decisive components of the ritual surrounded this particular one.”31 After the anointing of the new king, they blew the trumpets, and the people joined in shouting: “Long live King Solomon!” A joyful procession then accompanied the king from the holy place to his new throne, where he took his place and received the obeisance of his people (v. 40).32

King Joash’s ceremony is detailed in 2 Kings 11:4-20 and closely resembles King Solomon’s. He was crowned by the priest of the temple, received the “testimony”, and was anointed king (v. 12).

31 Buttrick, 3:14.
32 Ibid. It is possible that King Solomon’s name was changed at some point in the ceremony. He certainly had more than one name, including Jedidiah (2 Sam. 12:25).
Those present clapped their hands and shouted “May the king live!” The king then stood by a pillar of the temple while his people rejoiced and blew the trumpets. In verse 17, the priest Jehoiada officiated in making a covenant “between the LORD and the king and the people, that they should be the LORD’s people; between the king also and the people.” The people and the bodyguards then accompanied the king from the temple to the royal palace, where King Joash took his place on the throne (v. 19). “Somewhere within this ceremony, the king received a new name, a throne name.”

**Enthronement of Yahweh**

“In a Palestinian world familiar with the concept of kingship, from the king of a single city such as Jericho on the one hand to the king of a nation like Assyria on the other, what could need less apology than the designation of Yahweh as King, a God who was believed to have sovereign power in the world?” As has already been stated, it was a common concept throughout the entire ancient Near East that the local god was the king and supreme ruler of the state or polity. With the rise and development of the earthly Israelite kingship, it should be remembered that Yahweh was the original king of Israel. The validity and dating of some important verses supporting this claim, including Exodus 15:18, 19:16, Numbers 23:21, Deuteronomy 33:5, 1 Samuel 8:7, 12:12, and Judges 8:23, are unfortunately debated at great lengths. Many scholars discredit these passages, giving them later dates that render them invaluable. “But there is sufficient evidence to substantiate the claim that the covenant of Israel with Yahweh was a royal covenant, and Israel pledged loyalty to him in a covenantal cere-

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33 Ibid.
mony (cf. Josh. 24).” This would explain why the prophets thought of earthly kingship as an apostasy (1 Sam. 8:7; Hos. 8:4; 2 Nephi 10:14). Yet despite this secular kingship, Yahweh remained on his throne in Israelite ideology.

In keeping with the notion that Israelite kingship was based on neighboring models, some form of enthronement ceremony must have occurred to ensure Yahweh of his throne. The German scholar, Sigmund Mowinckel, led the way for a study of Yahweh’s enthronement in his revolutionary work, *Psalmenstudien.* Mowinckel observed a group of psalms, which he called the “Enthronement Psalms.” He hypothesized that these thematically related Psalms, including Psalms 47, 93, and 95–100, constituted a mythical enthronement festival similar to those found in Canaanite, Babylonian, and Egyptian theology.

“In these Psalms Yahweh is depicted as a mighty king who reigns over the entire world (47:3, 8, 9, 10). He subdues foreign nations under Israel (47:4). Israel rejoices, sings and bows down before Yahweh (95:1, 2, 6; 97:8) and so do the nations (47:2, 7, 8; 97:1; 98:4–6; 99:3; 100:1–2). The peoples enter the courts of Yahweh with songs of praise and offerings and prostrate themselves before him (96:7–9). With joyous song and the sound of a shofar, Yahweh ascends (47:6). He seats himself on his holy throne (47:9), the throne that was established long ago (93:2).”

These Psalms, he asserted, formed part of the text for the ceremony itself and were “composed to be performed in the temple of Jerusalem.”

A recurring and crucial expression in these psalmic descriptions is תָּנְדָּד הָלָוי (93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1) or תָּנְדָּד הָלָוי (47:8). These expressions translate into “Yahweh has become king,” or

35 Buttrick, 3:14.
38 Ibid., 20
“God has become king,” and imply that the Lord will reign hereafter. Because Yahweh was already king before the ceremony it is assumed that these Psalms represent a reenactment play of the ascension of the Lord to the throne, a ritual drama that was repeated annually in the Israelite cult. Through this repetition the participants discovered new powers within themselves and covenanted with their king. Dr. Allen Petersen expanded the idea of enthronement reenactments:

“Cult was to the ancient Israelites—and to primitive man in general—a phenomenon that included sacred actions through which society took a share in the divine force, the blessing. In order to get a share of the blessing the entire community [had] to covenant with the deity. Therefore the god is lord of the covenant.”

This is the very essence of cult worship. When the Israelites were chosen by Yahweh, they entered into his cult—into a sacred world, with sacred covenants required for admission. Sacred actions took the form of dramas, or reenactments of the mythical and historical events on which the existence of the community was based, such as the enthronement of their God. Consequently, when Israel reenacted the enthronement of their Heavenly King they recognized him as their only king, the sacred acts became “reality for the participants,” and their “covenant [was] renewed year after year.” Of course, the Jerusalem temple was at the center of these ritualistic events. It was there, over all other sanctuaries, that Yahweh chose to seat himself on his throne.

Through these so-called “Enthronement Psalms” we discover that the rituals of Yahweh’s enthronement ceremony directly correspond with the other secular and religious models of the era. These psalms distinctly follow the three-step formula of the

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39 Ibid., 21.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
ancient Near Eastern enthronement ceremonies and even include prevalent ideas such as creation (100:3; 95:5; 96:5), new names (96:8; 99:3; 100:4), and Yahweh as “King above all gods” (95:3; 96:4; 97:7).

Enthronement of the Messiah

It would be impossible to ignore the impact that kingship had on Israelite messianic expectations. Surrounded by both foreign and domestic kings, the oppressed Israelite nation anxiously anticipated a messiah who would come, subdue their enemies, and take his place as king, to rule and reign forever over Israel. It follows that Israel’s messiah would have to follow the pattern of divine kings.42 Leopold Sabourin noted that kingship was a common theme in prophecies of the coming Messiah. He stated,

“The great messianic texts [i.e. prophecies] are in fact associated with royal figures: the prophecy of Nathan (2 Sam 7:1–16); the sign of the Emmanuel (Isa. 7:14); the advent of the just king (Isa. 11:1–9) and the Bethlehemite Messiah (Mic. 5:1); and finally, the enthusiastic poem of Zechariah’s disciple, describing the arrival of the humble and peaceful king (Zech. 9:9). Thus the royal dignity was a prominent feature among the principal attributes of the expected Messiah.”43

As one would expect, ancient Israel’s messiah—their Savior King—also has a similar enthronement ceremony associated with his reign. Amid the tumult of aspiring Assyrian kings, as well as powerful Egyptian and Israelite vassal kings, the prophet Isaiah prophesied of the deliverance of Israel and outlined the enthronement of the Messiah. After the dismal description of Israel’s situation in the eighth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet continued in

42 This pattern includes descent from the royal line of David (2 Sam. 7:16), and of the covenant line of Abraham (Gen. 17:6), anointings (Ps. 2:2,6), divine sonship (2 Sam. 7:14, Ps. 2:7), as well as many other kingly attributes.

chapter nine, promising that those who “walked in darkness” will see “a great light” (v. 2). Thus begins the enthronement of the Messiah. Verse two “takes on the tone of a hymn, and describes the rejoicing of the redeemed before their God.” This hymn continues in verse three, where the Lord is praised for fulfilling his promise to Abraham to multiply his posterity (Gen. 17:2,4,6–7). Verse four speaks of Israel’s liberation and final victory over her enemies, and in verse six “the people themselves join in the hymn and proclaim the enthronement of the redeemer”:

Because to us a child is born,  
To us a son is given;  
And the dominion will be on his shoulders;  
And his name will be called  
Wonderful Counselor,  
Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father,  
Prince of Peace.

Although this passage is popularly recognized as a vision of the Messiah’s birth, many Christian scholars agree that this prophecy also refers to the future reign of the Messiah, when all enemies have been subdued, and the King and his people will live in everlasting peace. In this enthronement hymn Isaiah “makes use of the language of the enthronement ritual of Judah, a recollection of which had been preserved among the circles of the Jerusalem priests and the temple singers.”

The hymn begins with the proclamation of the birth of a son who will liberate Israel and who is, no doubt, connected with the divine sonship in 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalms 2:7. This son is also

45 Ibid., 125.  
46 Donald W. Parry, *Harmonizing Isaiah: Combining Ancient Sources* (Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), 2001), 64.  
identified with the child of Isaiah 7:14 whose name was to be called Immanuel, ‘God is with us’. The Messiah is then elevated to his new status where “dominion will be on his shoulders,” a phrase which “points to the vesting rite of a king who, as part of a coronation and enthronement ceremony, places or has placed upon his shoulders the robe of regal authority. In this passage the robe represents both kingly and priestly power.”

Isaiah proceeds by describing the nature of the Messiah’s kingly rule with a series of majestic titles. “What is to be expected from him as ruler is indicated by his great throne-name which, unlike the five-element title given to the king of Egypt, consists only of four elements.”

“These names are based on typical throne names but are, in fact, adaptations of such titles to indicate something other than the normal king.” The first of these appellations, Wonderful Counselor, “implies that the future king’s rule shall be guided by a divinely-inspired wisdom (Isa. 11:2–4) which shall command the awe with which men regard the counsel of God.” The second “emphasizes the fullness of his power,” and along with Psalms 45:6 is one of only two places in the Old Testament where the king is called God. He is then named the Everlasting Father, pointing to the protective and saving care he exercises over his people. The final throne name, the Prince of

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49 Kaiser, 2nd ed., 212. For the Egyptian royal titles and the bestowing of them cf. A. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford, 1950), 71. David, upon his ascension to the throne, took on a similar four-part name, or five if you count his father’s: “David, the son of Jesse; . . . the man who was raised up on high; the anointed of the God of Jacob; and the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1).


52 Kaiser, 1st ed., 129.
Peace, is reminiscent of the divine name in Judges 6:24 (םלֶלַח-יה), and portrays the “great future (Isa. 2:3–4) that the Messiah is to inaugurate (Mic. 5:5; Zech. 9:10).”53

Isaiah finishes the enthronement of Israel’s Messiah by placing him on the throne of David, where he will establish his kingdom “with judgment and with justice,” and reign in peace and righteousness “from henceforth even for ever” (Isa. 9:7). “With the coming of this king, the history of the human race, characterized by unrest, strife and devastation, approaches its conclusion. He will bring to the world an all-embracing and never-ending salvation.”54 Such were the kingly messianic expectations of the Israelite nation.

**Enthronement of Jesus Christ**

Early Christian doctrine reflects ancient Israel’s belief in a kingly messiah, and it was their belief that Jesus Christ fulfilled those messianic expectations. One of the main objectives of Matthew was to establish the kingship of Jesus Christ. He works towards this aim by establishing the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth, focusing on his kingship throughout the birth narrative, and by showing the audience the numerous ways in which Jesus’ birth, life, ministry, and death were the fulfillment of kingly messianic prophecies.

Matthew begins his gospel by giving the reader two genealogical reasons to be convinced of Jesus’ kingship: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Matthew then proceeds to lay out Jesus’ royal lineage. “The purpose of the genealogy is to show that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is King Messiah, the son of David, and Messiah of Israel, the

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53 Dummelow, 421.
54 Kaiser, 1st ed., 130.
Matthew explains to his audience that not only was Jesus the heavenly king, but he had a literal right, through lineage, to be the royal leader of Israel.

“If the crown of David had been assigned to his successor in the days of Herod it would have been placed on the head of Joseph. And who would have been the legal successor to Joseph? Jesus of Nazareth would have been then the King of the Jews, and the title on the cross spoke the truth. God had raised Him up to the house of David.”

Matthew then moves on to the birth narrative, which he sees as a direct fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 (Matt. 1:22–23). This is the same son who would be enthroned by Israel after he had subdued their enemies.

The story of the Magi is unique to the gospel of Matthew and “like the genealogy of Jesus, affirms that Jesus is King Messiah.” The Magi, of whom we know very little, came from the east to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2). Even the star that they followed reminds us of the prophetic star of the Davidic Messiah: “There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17, italics added). That Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the place of David’s birth and the origin of the prophesied king Messiah, only reaffirms that Jesus fulfilled of the messianic prophecies. In this instance and ten others Matthew employs the phrase unique to him, “that it might be fulfilled,” to show that Jesus was the long-awaited king. It is apparent that Matthew, as well as the other

56 James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 87, 90.
58 Another example of this occurs when Matthew points out Jesus’ fulfillment of the first two verses of the enthronement hymn found in Isaiah 9:1–7 (Matt. 4:12–16).
Gospel writers, believed that Jesus was the Israelite King Messiah.59

The New Testament contains several enthronement ceremonies pertaining to the enthronement of Jesus as “Son of God” and “King of Israel” (John 1:49). The first of these is the narrative of the triumphal entry of Jesus to the temple mount, an account depicted in all four gospels. In it we find that Jesus was anointed (John 12:3), he rode on a young ass to the temple mount60 (Matt. 21:7; Mark 11:7; Luke 19:35; John 12:14), and the people followed, shouting variations of “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord!” (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9–10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13). This ceremony is especially reminiscent of the ceremonies of Solomon and Joash.

Three more enthronement ceremonies from early Christianity are extremely valuable for study: Philippians 2:9-11, 1 Timothy 3:16, and Hebrews 1:5-13 each serve as enthronement hymns61 in which the three stages of Jesus’ heavenly enthronement, or exaltation, are given in an order directly corresponding to the enthronement rituals of the ancient Near East.62 Although Paul’s beliefs about the heavenly kingship of Jesus Christ differed greatly from the Jewish beliefs of the conquering Messiah, the enthronement ceremonies maintain similar characteristics and only augment in significance.

Philippians 2:6–11 In the middle of his instructional epistle to the Philippians on how to be more like Jesus, Paul “inserts a hymn

59 For more NT references to Jesus Christ as King, cf. Matt. 25:34, 27:37; Mark 15:2, 26; Luke. 23:3, 38; John 1:49, 6:5, 19:3; Acts 17:7; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 1:5, as well as many others.

60 As a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.”


to Christ, possibly of Jewish-Christian liturgical origin,” with which “his readers would be familiar, and which expressed his own ideas more forcefully and beautifully than he could do himself.” The hymn, found in Philippians 2:6-11, consists of only two sentences, but is considered by many to be “the great passage which is the chief glory of the epistle. Nowhere in his writings does [Paul] rise to a loftier height of eloquence, or afford us a deeper insight into his Christian beliefs.” The first sentence of the hymn (vv. 6–8) tells of Christ’s divine pre-existence, his ultimate condescension to leave his abode with God to take on the “likeness of man,” and his supreme humility and obedience “unto death, even the death of the cross.” The hymn does not end at the cross, however, but rather continues with a second sentence depicting the exaltation and enthronement of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:10–11)

This portion of the hymn embodies the three stages of ancient Near Eastern enthronement ceremonies: the raising of the new king to divine status, his presentation to God, and his enthronement and reception of kingly power. God, because of Christ’s aforementioned humility and obedience, places His Son on an ex-

63 Ibid., vol. 2, 50:17, 250. “The hymnic interpretation of this section is based on the rhythmic quality of the sentences, on the use of parallelism (found in Old Testament psalms and poetry), and on the rare, characteristically un-Pauline expressions (kenoun, . . . harpagmos, hyperypsoun, morphe, shema, is theo einai).”


65 Ibid.
alted throne and bestows upon Him a new name. “The name is Kyrios which appears at the end of the hymn; this LXX equivalent of Adonai (my Lord) was used as the substitute for the ineffable tetragrammaton, YHWH. It is the name that surpasses that of all celestial beings,”66 and the name “under which our Saviour will be adored throughout the universe.”67 The hymn then attributes to Christ the words that Isaiah originally penned concerning Yahweh: “I have sworn by myself . . . that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” (Isa. 45:23). We learn from the final strophe of the hymn that the glory of God the Father is found in every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Kyrios, Lord. “The glory of the Father will be realised in the universal acknowledgment of the Lordship of the Son whom He enthroned.”68 Hence the invitation from Paul to his reader in the verses following the hymn: “Wherefore . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling . . . that ye may be . . . the sons of God” (Phil. 2:12–15). “The Servant-Son of Man is confessed as Lord, a perfected humanity is combined with the majesty of Yahweh. The universe gives glory to God and thereby attains the goal of its creation and redemption.”69

1 Timothy 3:16 Paul included another enthronement hymn in his writings, this time inserted into his first epistle to Timothy. After stating his reason for writing to Timothy, “that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God”

67 Dummelow, 973.
68 Ibid., 974.
69 Matthew Black, Peake’s Commentary on the Bible (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 987. Moses 1:39 takes on a new significance when we consider that God receives His glory from the recognition by His children that Jesus Christ is the Enthroned King and Lord (Yahweh). Thus, as we acknowledge our Lord for what He is and then follow Him with the humility of a servant (Phil. 2:7) and obedience unto death (v. 8), then is God’s glory fully realized, and we become His sons—i.e. kings (v. 15). “For behold, this is my work and my glory to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).
(1 Tim. 3:15), Paul quotes a hymn “patterned . . . after the ancient Egyptian enthronement ceremony,” which includes the three-stage patterns previously mentioned. This particular ancient Christian hymn is thought to be a creed of the “true believer” set to music, attested to by its “rhythmic structure and the assonance of the six Greek verbs.”

Paul’s purpose for inserting this hymn into his writings was to help the reader to understand how to behave in the house of God. The Greek word used here, ἀναστρέφεσθαι, does not simply mean “behavior” in the narrow sense, but is used to describe a “manner of life.” This becomes imperative as we examine the hymn itself.

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:
God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit,
seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles,
believed on in the world, received up into glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)

Beginning with the first line, we hear of the greatness of the “mystery of godliness,” which forms the preface for the next three phrases. Surely the mystery of godliness is great, but what is it? It does not mean mysterious in the modern sense, but revealed truth. It is a word that immediately evokes reflection upon the “mystery cults”, where higher rites and rituals were revealed only to the deserving, be that through membership, worthiness, etc. With the previous mentioning of the “house of God” and now the “mystery of godliness,” the idea of Israel’s temple worship is certainly present. As the participants accept the mystery, they also accept the responsibility to profess godliness. “Holy itself, and proceeding from the Holy One, it bids its recipients be holy, even as He is Holy Who gives it.”

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70 Buttrick, The Interpreter’s Bible, 11:423.
73 Ibid.
74 Alfred Plummer, The Pastoral Epistles (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1900), 133.
The mystery found in the final three passages of verse 16, therefore, “is nothing less than finding the secret of godliness, how to live godly lives, how to become like God.”

In keeping with this conviction, the final portion of this ancient hymn quantifies the mystery of godliness. It is this: Christ, Yahweh descended to earth and took on a body of flesh—human in every aspect. Although Christ appeared in flesh, he remained absolutely sinless, which led to his justification as Heavenly King by the Holy Ghost. This ratification of Jesus Christ by the Holy Ghost also meets with the acclamations of angels, men (including the Gentiles), and the entire world. Finally the Lord Jesus Christ is “received up into glory,” where He is endowed with all power and subsequently takes His eternal throne. Here, again, the early Christians enthroned their Heavenly King, through praise and song, in a positively Near Eastern traditional fashion.

Hebrews 1:5–13 The final hymn is found in the first chapter of Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews. The book of Hebrews clearly has two goals: to establish Christ’s position as the Great High Priest, and secondly as the Exalted King. “The entire structure of the Epistle rests on this great conception, the Son of God, the eternal Priest-King.” The hymn found in the first chapter of this epistle is the most clear and complete example of New Testament enthronement hymns and thoroughly fulfills each of the three Near Eastern enthronement requirements, as well as all of the ancient Israelite expectations. The hymn even separates nicely into three stages, and its literary progression “brings listeners into the drama of Christ’s enthronement by allowing them to overhear what God

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75 Frederick C. Eiselen, Edwin Lewis, and David G. Downey, eds. The Abingdon Bible Commentary. Prof. W. J. Lowstuter (New York: Abingdon, 1929), 1,282. Notice that this enthronement hymn of the Lord Jesus Christ is the pattern given to us through which we are to follow to become like God, the Eternal King.

76 Thomas Charles Edwards, The Epistle to the Hebrews (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1900), 17.
declares to the Son and to the angels.” The first step (vv. 5–6) is the public announcement, by God the Father, of Jesus’ elevation to the rank of Son of God whom angels must adore (elevation to divine status). In the next stage (vv. 7–12) we find the declaration of Jesus Christ’s everlasting lordship (presentation to God, angels, and man). The final stage (v. 13), and the apex of the ceremony, is the actual enthronement of the Lord on the right hand of God (enthronement and reception of kingly power).

5. For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?

6. And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.

7. And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.

8. But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

9. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.

10. And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands:

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78 Psalms 2:7, a royal psalm celebrating the enthronements of the Judaic King as well as the Messiah, is here quoted to establish Christ’s legitimacy and divinity.

79 2 Sam. 7:14 is quoted here pointing out the father-son relationship between God and Davidic Ruler. The day of the king’s accession to power was the day on which he was “begotten” as the Son of God. Christ is the Son of David, the Son of God, the Messiah.

80 Quoting a combination of Deuteronomy 32:43 (a line found only in the LXX version of the OT) and Psalm 97:7

81 A Quote taken from Psalm 104:4. Used to bring out the contrast between angels and the Son. The angels are mutable, transitory beings, unlike the son, who is Everlasting.

82 Here the author quotes Psalm 45:6–7, relating Christ to the Messianic King.
11. They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment;
12. And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.\(^{83}\)
13. But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?\(^{84}\)

Not only does this hymn perfectly mimic other models of enthronement from the ancient Near East, it also contains many elements that establish the legitimate rule of Jesus the King in both Near Eastern and Israelite expectations. Foremost, the hymn incorporates quotations from seven different Old Testament references to Yahweh and the Messiah as King of Heaven and Earth. Common elements of divine kingship emerge, including sonship and begottenness, creation references, priesthood, anointings, new names, inheritances, and power given both in heaven and on earth. Reference is also made to kingdoms, crowns, thrones, and sceptres. These components are combined together in this early Christian hymn to testify of the eternal kingship of Jesus Christ, and to instruct His subjects on how to approach “the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16).

“This . . . world is the kingdom of which the King-Priest is eternal Monarch. As we partake in His priesthood, we share also in His Kingship. We enter into the holiest place and stand before the mercy-seat, but our absolution is announced and confirmed to us by the Divine summons to sit down with Christ in His throne, as He has sat down with His Father in His throne.”\(^{85}\)

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\(^{83}\) Taken from Psalm 102:25–27, these verses referred to Yahweh as the creator and permanent God-King. They are here used to prove that Jesus is that very King.

\(^{84}\) A direct quote from Psalm 110:1. “Hebrews draws on the familiar use of Ps 110:1 as a testimony to Jesus’ exaltation, while giving a fresh interpretation of the psalm in terms not only of Christ’s royal power but also of the definitive quality of his priestly work and his victory over suffering and death in the contest of faith.” Koester, 203.

\(^{85}\) Edwards, 308–309.
Conclusion

As kingship developed throughout the ancient world, the Israelite nation institutionalized its practices and incorporated them into its own politics and religious beliefs. Following the patterns set forth by their neighbors, Israel enthroned their God, Yahweh, as well as their future Messiah. The New Testament testifies that this Heavenly King descended from His throne to save all mankind both spiritually and temporally. The early Christians continued to enthrone their King through their obeisance to him, as well as through song and ritual.

Just as enthronements were commonly associated with temple rituals in antiquity, so too are enthronement reenactments still performed in modern temples today. The participants recognize their Lord as the Great King of the universe, and then are themselves elevated to a new, divine status, presented before their God, and are eventually endowed with all power and welcomed to sit down, as a king, with their Heavenly King.

When we know that God reigns it makes us quiet and free. When we know what kind of God He is Who reigns, it gives us light and hope. When we know God’s plan for us, we follow His example of enthronement until we too receive a celestial crown. It is then that the Lord Jesus Christ becomes the “King of Kings” (Rev. 19:16).