

Chapter 8

No Stelae, No Queens: Two Issues Concerning the Kings of Israel and Judah

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This chapter treats two independent issues relevant to the study of the kings of Israel and Judah: (a) the lack of royal inscriptions from these kings, and (b) the lack of queens in the royal courts of Samaria and Jerusalem. The treatment will be relatively short — after all, we are dealing here with “lack,” not with evidence — but I hope that in the end the reader will agree that the issues are of major significance for our understanding of ancient Israelite society and religion.

It gives me extreme pleasure to dedicate this chapter to Eric Meyers, the person who introduced me to the academic study of Judaism during my undergraduate career more than thirty years ago.¹ I fondly refer to Eric as “my first teacher,” and it is heartwarming to have an enduring friendship after more than three decades.²

NO STELAE

The question of whether or not Israelite kings erected royal inscriptions has received considerable attention from a variety of scholars utilizing

a variety of approaches in recent years. The answer to this question, however, regardless of the approach employed, has been the same: yes, the kings of Israel and Judah did erect such monuments. I would like to propose a different answer: no, they did not.

The flurry of recent scholarly activity absolves me of having to present a full examination of the state of the question, especially in light of Parker’s (2000) fine and detailed contribution. Instead, only a brief review of the literature is necessary, after which I shall pass to my own analysis of the issue, including, most importantly, my reasons for a conclusion contrary to that posited by others.

The most eloquent statement in favor of the view that (at least) the kings of Judah erected royal inscriptions was put forward recently by Na’aman (1998). His basic argument, anticipated by others in a minor way (see, e.g., Montgomery 1951: 35 and Van Seters 1983: 301), runs as follows: selected passages in the book of Kings evoke the language of West Semitic dedicatory inscriptions, either the building type or the military type; therefore, these

passages in Kings most likely are based on stelae read by the author(s) of Kings, or perhaps by the authors of the sources cited by the author(s) of Kings, that is, the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kgs 14:19, etc.) and the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah (1 Kgs 14:29, etc.).

Parker (2000) agrees, in theory, that the Israelite and Judahite kings could have erected inscribed stelae, but he demurs on the issue of the passages from Kings. He argues that the passages are sufficiently different from the kind of inscriptions one finds on West Semitic stelae, and, therefore, believes that the author of Kings did not make use of such epigraphs, even if they existed.

An idiosyncratic view is that of Wesselius (1999a; 1999b), who posits that the Aramaic inscription from Tel Dan is the work of Jehu, which is to say that we now possess our first ancient Israelite royal inscription. But this analysis is not convincing, for it leaves unexplained such questions as to why the text is written in Aramaic (and not in Hebrew), and why the same individual credited by the Bible as eradicating Baal worship should twice evoke Hadad (= Baal) in a positive vein. Wesselius anticipated such criticisms and attempted to counter them in his article, but I suspect that few scholars will be persuaded by his argument.

I would like to propose a new approach altogether: the kings of Israel and Judah did *not* produce royal monumental inscriptions because of the social, political, and theological controls specific to Israel in the ancient Near Eastern world. That is to say, Parker is correct that the author(s) of Kings (and/or the sources of Kings) did not utilize royal inscriptions;³ but Parker, Na'aman, and others are incorrect in positing the existence of such inscriptions.

It seems to me that after 150 years of excavation in the land of Israel and its environs, especially given the variety of places excavated and the range of discoveries made, if Israelite, Israelian, and Judahite royal inscriptions existed, then we would have found them by now.⁴ The evidence is as follows. In close proximity to Israel, archaeologists have uncovered royal inscriptions erected by Mesha, king of Moab, at Dibon and at El-Kerak (the latter extremely fragmentary), by Hazael, king of Aram,

at Dan (at least he is the most likely candidate for the author of this document), and by Akkayush, king of Ekron, at Ekron.⁵ Less dramatic and not quite a royal inscription, but nevertheless the work of a neighboring king or his scribe, is the Tel Siran bottle inscription of Amminadav, king of Ammon. Further afield we have the stelae of various Aramean kings found throughout Syria, and, of course, we have some relevant Phoenician documents such as the inscription of Yehawmilk, king of Byblos, and various tomb epitaphs.

It is not that archaeologists simply have not excavated Israelite royal centers and other major cities to the same extent that they have excavated such sites in neighboring lands. Indeed, after more than a century of exploration, we can point to the palace of Omri and Ahab at Samaria, major public works at Megiddo and Hazor, a large altar site at Dan, the remains of Shechem and Tirzah, fortifications and other structures at Lachish, a temple at Arad, and numerous buildings in Jerusalem in the excavated portions of the City of David and the Ophel. And yet we have nothing, not a single royal inscription. We have inscriptions from almost all of the aforementioned sites, but none of them can be identified as a royal inscription.

Single fragments of two display inscriptions have been found, one in Samaria and one in Jerusalem, but the extremely fragmentary nature of these two finds prevents any conclusion as to their authors, contents, or purpose. The Samaria find includes only one word, apparently the word אִשְׁרָי, presumably the relative pronoun (Sukenik 1936),⁶ but no further statement can be made. The Jerusalem find is the Ophel inscription (Naveh 1982; Ben-Dov 1994; Ahituv 1992: 17–18), in which only two or three complete words can be read. The subject appears to be waterworks of some sort, but we can say nothing further about this text. I certainly would not jump to the conclusion of Ben-Dov (1994: 75):

This fragment...indicate[s] that it was not uncommon for stelae, inscriptions and plaques bearing texts in praise of rulers...to be installed in the capital of the kings of Judah.

We are left, accordingly, with lack of evidence. This silence is most notable in the case of Hezekiah's tunnel, the most sure correlation between a building project undertaken by a king of Israel or Judah mentioned in the Bible and a known archaeological site.⁷ Indeed, we have an inscription from this site, but it is noteworthy that the words are conspicuously not by the king but rather by a workman or foreman. One need only contrast this situation with the boasts of other kings about their waterworks. Most famous are the boasts of the Assyrian kings, including statements familiar to Isaiah as demonstrated by Machinist (1983). But we need not travel so far to read such texts, because Mesha of Moab describes comparable activities (Mesha Stele, especially line 23), and the aforementioned Tel Siran bottle inscription refers to Amminadav's similar effort (line 5). I believe we may ask rather forthrightly: if other Near Eastern kings, great and small, took credit for the construction of major water resource management projects, and if the dominant view that Israelite kings also wrote royal inscriptions is correct, should we not expect to find such a text at the site of Hezekiah's tunnel?

In the current debate between the maximalists and the minimalists, the latter claim that the lack of evidence described above indicates that the kings mentioned in the Bible either did not exist at all or were minor petty rulers. But such an approach is misdirected in the extreme. There plainly is enough evidence from Assyrian records, in particular, to establish the basic historicity of the record presented in the book of Kings (see Halpern 1995: 30 for a convenient summary). But to return to the specific issue at hand, as suggested above, I believe we will not find royal inscriptions, because there were social, political, and theological controls that operated to prevent the kings from producing and displaying monumental stelae and other, lesser epigraphs.

One of the main teachings of the Bible, repeated in a variety of contexts, is the emphasis on humility. The most famous passage, of course, is Micah 6:8 in which the prophet states that one of the three basic items required by God is *הצנע לכת עם אלהיך* "to walk humbly with your God." The only other attestation of the root *צנע* in the Bible, Prov 11:2,

reads as follows: *בא זדון ויבא קלון ואת צנועים חכמה* "arrogance comes, then disgrace comes, but with the humble is wisdom."⁸ Other pertinent passages from the prophets and poetic books, all using the root *ענו*, include Isa 11:4 *ארץ לענוי* "and he shall decide with justice for the humble of the earth;" Zeph 2:3 *בקשו ענוה* "seek humility;" Ps 25:9 *ידרך ענוים וילמד ענוים דרכו* "he leads the humble with justice, and he teaches the humble his way;" Ps 37:11 *וענוים יירשו ארץ והתענגו על רב שלום* "and the humble shall inherit the earth, and they shall have pleasure in abundant peace;" Ps 149:4 *יפאר ענוים בישועה* "he adorns the humble with victory;" and Prov 3:34 *ולענוים יתן חן* "and to the humble he grants grace." The historical books, using the root *כנע*, praise various kings for having humbled themselves before God, e.g., 2 Kgs 22:19, where Huldah says to Josiah, *ותכנע מפני יהוה* "and you humbled yourself before YHWH" (see also 2 Chr 12:6–7, 12:12 concerning Rehoboam and his men humbling themselves before God in the wake of Shishak's invasion; 2 Chr 33:12 where Manasseh humbles himself before God while held captive by the king of Assyria; etc.). Even Ahab is accorded such a remark, as God says to Elijah in 1 Kgs 21:29 *הראית כי נכנע אהאב מפני* "have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?"

The Bible's constant emphasis on humility, I submit, was taken seriously by the people of Israel to such an extent, it appears, that the kings of both kingdoms refrained from following the practices of neighboring monarchs in erecting stelae boasting of their accomplishments. Indeed, one can go further and note that in other matters, the kings of Israel and Judah differed from neighboring kings. A classic example concerns Ahab, of all people. In a famous episode in the Bible, we read how this monarch observed the moral teachings of Israel, even as he violated the most basic of Israel's cultic practices. I refer to Ahab's acceptance of Naboth's response in 1 Kings 21, without attempting to obtain the vineyard through illegal methods. Ahab appears to be guided by the principle of *לא תחמד* "you shall not covet" (Exod 20:17, Deut 5:21), so that he was unable to take further action. Jezebel, by contrast, was raised in a different cultural milieu — in fact, in her culture the gods are portrayed as covetous (see *CTU* 1.12.I:38, 1.92:29 for Baal, *CTU* 1.92:6 for Ath-

tart, *CTU* 1.17.VI:13–14 for Anat) — and, therefore, she did not feel constrained by Israel's teachings (see Gordon 1963; 1996: 59–61). It is striking that Ahab's lack of action in this story runs counter to Samuel's description of monarchy in 1 Samuel 8. There we read that among the king's abuses will be *יקח את שדותיכם ואת כרמיכם ואת הטובים יקח* “and your fields and your vineyards, and your good olivegroves he will take” (v. 14), and yet Ahab refrained from such action. When we recall further that Samuel's denunciation of kingship was based on the reality of royal actions attested in the ancient Near East (see Mendelssohn 1956), among them the appropriation of property,⁹ Ahab's lack of action is even more remarkable.

But to return to the issue of humility, a most instructive text appears in 2 Chr 32:24–26 concerning Hezekiah. Here the Chronicler, in what appears to be an attempt to explain why this glorious king suffered from an unspecified disease, refers to Hezekiah's hubris, though in the end he amended his behavior and thereby saved both himself and the nation from God's wrath. The specific wordings are *כי גבה לבו* “for his heart was haughty” (v. 25), and *ויכנע יחזקיהו בגבה לבו* “and Hezekiah humbled himself for the haughtiness of his heart” (v. 26). It is not quite clear which action by Hezekiah is criticized here, but most likely the text refers to the king having shown his treasury to the emissaries from Babylon. True, this is referred to only in the older sources of 2 Kgs 20:13–15 = Isa 39:2–4, and the Chronicler (2 Chr 32:31) does not relate the visit by the Babylonian ambassadors directly to Hezekiah's pride. But in both Kings (/Isaiah) and Chronicles, the two episodes of Hezekiah's illness and the visit by the Babylonian delegation are juxtaposed and intertwined, so most likely it is this display of hubris that the Chronicler has in mind when he refers to Hezekiah's *גבה לבו* “haughtiness of heart” (for discussion see Williamson 1982: 386–87; Japhet 1993: 992–93).¹⁰ It is important to add that Chronicles does not object to the wealth of the king. In fact, the description of Hezekiah's wealth in 2 Chr 32:27–29 is much grander than that noted in 2 Kgs 20:13 (= Isa 39:2). The message is clear: there is nothing wrong with riches and success, only in boasting about it.

Now one might argue that the Chronicler's critique of arrogance represents only post-exilic theology, with closer links to the moralizing of post-biblical Jewish texts than to pre-exilic thought in Israel and Judah. But in light of the panoply of texts pertaining to humility presented above — and I did not even cite perhaps the most famous of all texts: Numb 12:3 *והאיש משה ענו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה* “and the man Moses was very humble, more so than any man on the face of the earth” — clearly one must recognize this point as a basic tenet of Israelite thinking throughout the biblical period. The passage in 2 Chr 32:24–26 provides our best example relevant to a king of Israel or Judah, but the theology reflected there is not an innovation of the post-exilic period.¹¹

Another instructive text is Isa 22:15–16, where the prophet admonishes Shevna, the king's majordomo, for having prepared such an elaborate tomb. It is our good fortune that we most likely have uncovered the actual tomb of this individual in Silwan.¹² Assuming the tomb in Silwan is that of Shevna, this discovery represents another excellent correspondence (along with Hezekiah's tunnel discussed above) between a biblical passage and an archaeological site. Shevna's burial site is among the most elaborate ever found in Israel; it is one of only four above-ground monolithic tombs found in the country (the other three are in close proximity of Silwan), and it has several unique traits, e.g., an outside installation apparently to allow offerings at all times (see Bloch-Smith 1992: 43, 209–10). Furthermore, the tomb includes an inscription that closely parallels the tomb inscription of Tabnit, king of Sidon, in contrast to other Israelite tombs, which either lack epitaphs altogether or have simpler inscriptions.¹³ In light of this archaeological discovery, we gain a fuller understanding of Isaiah's critique of Shevna's tomb. This royal official contradicted the Israelite teaching of modesty, a point that led the prophet to single him out for disapproval.¹⁴

The above evidence demonstrates that humility played a special role in Israelite religion. Although we occasionally have such statements in other Near Eastern traditions (e.g., in the Egyptian Instruction of Ptahhotep),¹⁵ the evidence demonstrates that

kings in particular, as well as other officials, ignored this teaching; one need only consider the enormous size of the Old Kingdom pyramids, the New Kingdom mortuary temples, the Abu Simbel shrine, and similar monuments, all intended as boastful statements of the pharaohs. For a textual reference, one may point to a passage such as Ahiqar 107, [ו] מלך כרחמן אף קלה גבה ה[ו] “a king is like the Merciful [= El/God], indeed his voice is haughty,” with no condemnation implied.¹⁶ In Israel, by contrast, the kings followed the teaching of humility (and other basic teachings as well, as noted above in the case of Naboth’s vineyard), a point which I believe explains the total absence of royal inscriptions from Israel and Judah.¹⁷

This contention is obviously an *argumentum e silentio*, and I will be the first to jump for joy if my suggestion is disproved by the discovery of a royal inscription from David, Solomon, or any of their dozens of successors in Israel and Judah. But, if after 150 years of digging we still have not found any, my working hypothesis is that they did not exist.

NO QUEENS

As is well known, the term מלכה “queen” is never applied to a royal woman in the court of Israel or Judah. This term may be used for a reigning monarch from Arabia, viz., the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10, or for a Jewish woman married to the king of Persia, viz., Esther; but מלכה “queen” is never applied to any of the royal women within the constellation of the Israelite, Israelian, or Judahite royal families (see, e.g., Gordon 1988: 130).¹⁸ This point extends even to individuals such as Jezebel in Samaria and Athaliah in Jerusalem, both of whom wielded considerable power, the latter, of course, even serving as regent (note the participle form מלכת in 2 Kgs 11:3).

In place of the queen in the royal court of Judah stood the *gevira*, best translated as “royal-lady,” though “queen-mother” is the best functional equivalent in English. Probably the kingdom of Israel included the same position with the same title *gevira*, though the evidence is less forthcoming. In 2 Kgs 10:13, royal visitors from Judah travel to Israel to visit בני המלך ובני הגבירה “the sons of the

king and the sons of the *gevira*,” since these words are in the mouth of the Judahite visitors, we cannot be sure whether their use of the word *gevira* reflects their native usage or attests to the same position in the kingdom of Israel. In any case, we can reaffirm the statement that no “queen” appears in the very detailed material concerning Saul, David, Solomon, and the dozens of kings of Israel and Judah who followed them after the split in the kingdom. As to my preferring the term “royal-lady” over “queen-mother,” I would not use the latter because it includes the word “queen,” thus running counter to the very point under consideration here.¹⁹

To the best of my knowledge, no one has offered an explanation for the lack of a queen in the courts of Israel and Judah. I will propose one below, but first let us review the evidence from Israel’s neighbors.

In other cultures of the Near East, generally the wife of the king, that is, the queen, the king’s consort, served as the chief royal female in the court. Famous examples include Tiy, wife of Amenhotep III, Nefertiti, wife of Akhenaten, Nefertari, wife of Rameses II (all of Egypt), Puduḥepa, wife of Hattušili III (of Hatti), and Šibtu, wife of Zimri-Lim (of Mari).²⁰ This is not to deny that on occasion the mother of the king served in an official capacity or wielded power in the court. For example, in Assyria, the mother of the king ruled the harem consisting of the king’s wives and concubines (Leichty 1995: 949). Ugarit has yielded several letters written by the king to his mother regarding political and administrative issues (Heltzer 1982: 182),²¹ and it is quite possible that the queen-mother played a role in the royal succession (Gordon 1988; for further discussion see Wiggins 1993: 65–66).²² In Hatti, the title Tawananna, “queen,” was retained by the individual who bore it until she died, even when she survived her husband the late king, and only then did it pass to the wife of the king (Gurney 1952: 66; Beckman 1995: 537).²³ In Egypt, Thutmose IV portrayed himself with his mother Tiaa more often than with his wives (Kozloff and Bryan 1992: 35–36), and Rameses II held a special place for his mother Tuya (Kitchen 1982: 97). The Bible portrays the mother of the king of Massa, a tribe of the Syrian desert (Eph’al 1984: 218–19), advising her son in

Prov 31:1–9. But side-by-side with these examples, certainly in the cases of Rameses II and Hattušili III, we also see the wife of the king (as noted above, Nefertari and Puduḥepa, respectively) functioning as the major female figure in the royal family. This pattern is clearly the general practice in the ancient Near Eastern monarchy.

By contrast, the Bible portrays the *gevira* as the dominant royal woman for the entire history of the kingdom of Judah. The first sign of this is the statement in 1 Kgs 2:19 that Bathsheba was seated to the right of Solomon on a throne reserved especially for her. We then read the numerous accession notices of the Judahite kings mentioning the name of the mother of the king, with no reference to the wife of the king (the first occurs in 1 Kgs 14:21). Towards the end of the Judahite kingdom, we gain a few more specific references. For example, when Jehoiachin, king of Judah, leaves the city of Jerusalem in 598 B.C.E. to meet Nebuchadnezzar, he is accompanied by his mother (2 Kgs 24:12; see also Jer 29:2), and when God commands Jeremiah to address the royal “couple,” the wording is *אמר למלך ולגבירה* “say to the king and to the *gevira*” (Jer 13:18).

In light of this evidence, both biblical and extra-biblical, we may affirm that a significant difference existed between Israel and her neighbors. In Israel, the position of queen does not exist and the wife of the reigning king plays no public role in the realm. Elsewhere in the Near East, notwithstanding the evidence presented above regarding the queen-mother, the chief royal woman in the court was the queen, the wife of the king. Moreover, on occasion the queen wielded considerable power; most striking is the diplomatic correspondence of Puduḥepa of Hatti (for samples, see conveniently Beckman 1996: 123, 125–31).

We now are in a position to ask the important question: Why? Why did Israel alone in the ancient Near East not provide a position of prominence for the wife of the king?

As is well known, the king and queen in the typical ancient Near Eastern society had religious responsibilities. Most importantly, they served as the earthly representatives of the chief god and chief goddess of the pantheon. An up-to-date survey of the various cultures of the ancient Near East rel-

evant to this point would be a welcome addition to the scholarly literature.²⁴ For our present purpose, it suffices to point out only a few celebrated facts in the most general of terms. In major empires such as Egypt, Hatti, and Assyria, the king served as high priest of the chief god, if not all the gods, at least in a *de jure* fashion, for naturally *de facto* specially trained priests administered the cult on a regular basis. The melding of king and deity can be illustrated by the annual (re-)coronation of the Assyrian king at which the assembled shouted “Assur is king!” referring, that is, to the chief god of the realm (Oppenheim 1964: 99). A similar ceremony existed in Egypt (Frankfort 1948: 129–32), though, of course, in this case one can expand upon the point because the pharaoh was viewed as the god Horus incarnate. The Hittite king is referred to as “the Sun,” and the Hittite queen has a special relationship with the sun-goddess (Gurney 1952: 140–41). An important Hittite ritual text describes how the king and queen together exit the palace, proceed to the temple of Zababa, kneel, and then sit upon the throne (Gurney 1952: 154–55). In sum, although Kozloff and Bryan (1992: 43) refer specifically to Egypt in noting that “the theological paradigm by which the king’s family relationships were patterned after those of the great gods,” the same words could be applied to the ancient Near East in general.

The system of governance in ancient Israel, by contrast, was designed to prevent such an understanding of the king and his wife. First of all, the king could not serve as high priest, or as priest at any rank, because the classical system demanded that the king stem from the tribe of Judah and the priests from the tribe of Levi. Even in the northern kingdom of Israel, where the king could stem from any of the northern tribes, we do not see the king performing a sacerdotal role. Jeroboam I appointed non-Levites as priests (1 Kgs 12:31), but the phrase *מקצות העם* “from among the people” implies non-royalty. There are exceptions to the above generalization, but mostly they follow a pattern. At an early stage in the Israelite monarchy, presumably before the Levite monopoly was firmly established, David’s sons served as priests (2 Sam 8:18). The other instances of royal involvement in the sacrificial service are limited to dedications

of temples and altars (see Hurowitz 1992: 292), thus with David (2 Sam 6:17), Solomon (1 Kgs 8:62–63),²⁵ Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 12:31–13:1), and Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:12–13). The singularity of these events is self-evident; note especially the manner in which Ahaz instructs the priest Uriah on how to perform the sacrifices henceforth (2 Kgs 16:15–16). In short, there is no sustained involvement in the cult by the king in either Israel or Judah.²⁶

Even if the king could not serve in a priestly role, it is still very possible that he was viewed in some way as the representative of Yahweh on earth. After all, royal imagery is used for both God and king, the shepherd metaphor is applied to both, and the two appear parallel in various biblical statements (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:10, 22:13, Qoh 8:2, etc.; see also Exod 22:27, though here the word נָשִׂיא “ruler” is used). In addition, passages such as Ps 2:6–7, 89:26–27 demonstrate a close familial connection between the king and Yahweh.

Assuming that the average Israelite saw the king as God’s agent on earth, there would be an inherent danger in elevating the wife of the king to the level of official consort. The official religion of ancient Israel viewed Yahweh alone as the ruler of the universe, with no attendant deities and, most importantly, no consort.²⁷ Obviously, on a popular level, such was not the case, as the presence of the expression וְלֵאשֶׁרָתָהּ לַיהוָה... “Yahweh...and his Asherah” at Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntilet Ajrud clearly demonstrates. But the intellectuals responsible for the Bible believed otherwise, and we may assume that their convictions had influence over many aspects of Israelite society, including the manner of the king.

Against such background, one can understand that the presence of a queen as the official consort of the king would be considered theologically dangerous. One need only recall the Hittite ritual mentioned above, with king and queen present, or glance at the rock relief at Firatkin with Hattušili libating before the storm-god and Puduḥepa libating before the goddess Hapat (see van den Hout 1995: 1111) to realize how perilous it would be for ancient Israelite theologians, political theorists, and the like, to countenance a queen in the royal court of Israel or Judah.

There still is a need for a royal woman in the court, and this function is filled by the mother of the king. As we have seen, there were precedents for this royal female having some stature. It appears that Israel formalized this position in a way otherwise not encountered in the ancient sources. Exactly what the *gevira* did in the court cannot be determined with any specificity. We have one well-known account of Bathsheba receiving Adonijah and serving as a channel of communication to king Solomon (1 Kgs 2:13–18), but we do not know whether this was a regular occurrence or not. Another episode informs us that Maacah was involved with the cult of Asherah, an action which led (most likely) her grandson (see above, n. 22), King Asa, to dismiss her from the position of *gevira* (1 Kgs 15:13); but this seems to have been a singular event and we should not extrapolate from this that the *gevira* served as a religious functionary (see further below). I am content to assume that the *gevira* served the general role of “royal-lady” (my definition above), if for no other reason than to provide a female presence alongside the king, as presumably required by the rules of etiquette governing official occasions (see 2 Kgs 24:12).²⁸

In short, I propose that the lack of a queen in the royal courts of Israel and Judah be seen as a direct reflection of Israel’s unique theology in the ancient Near East.²⁹ Ironically, other scholars (for example, in a radical fashion Ahlström 1963: 57–88; and, less radically, Ackerman 1993; 1998: 138–54) have proposed a religious function for the *gevira*, to be more specific, as symbolizing “the virgin goddess in the *hieros gamos* ceremony,” or as the “ideological replica” of Asherah in her role as mother of the gods (Ahlström 1963: 75–76). This understanding of the rank of *gevira*, however, imputes to Israel a ceremony not attested in the Bible,³⁰ and places far too much emphasis on the singular experience of Maacah. There simply is no evidence for this approach. Far from ascribing a religious function to the *gevira*, I am arguing for exactly the opposite: that the elevation of the mother of the king to “royal-lady” in ancient Israel was intended to dispel any suggestion that the king had a consort, thereby paralleling Israel’s view of Yahweh, a deity who had no consort.

CONCLUSION

This essay takes an opposite approach to that offered in much of recent scholarship. The fashion among scholars today is to assume that the Israelites were in many ways indistinguishable from the Canaanites, and by extension shared the general theology of the polytheistic ancient Near East. I have charted a different course altogether. The biblical record — which once more I must emphasize is to be understood as an expression of the official teachings of ancient Israel, often at

odds with popular currents in the society — reveals a religious tradition that charted a new course in the ancient world. The two items discussed herein, both relevant to the monarchy in ancient Israel, represent two aspects where Israel differed. The emphasis on humility preached by Israelite religious leaders prevented the kings from erecting boastful stelae, and the uniqueness of Yahweh among the gods of antiquity as a deity without a consort explains the absence of queens from the royal courts of Israel.³¹

NOTES

- 1 I was a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill during the years 1971–1975. At the time, the offerings in Jewish Studies on that campus were limited, so Eric Meyers was imported from Duke University to teach at UNC as well.
- 2 Indeed, not even the intense basketball rivalry between the two neighboring institutions of UNC and Duke has affected our amicable relationship!
- 3 For one possible quasi-exception, see below, n. 17, regarding 1 Kgs 6:1–2.
- 4 I use the term “Israelite” to refer to pan-Israel (in this particular case, this refers to the united monarchy under David and Solomon), the term “Israelian” to refer to the northern kingdom of Israel, and the term “Judahite” to refer to the southern kingdom of Judah. In a separate article, Na’aman (1999: 112–13) argues that West Semitic royal inscriptions appear suddenly in the second half of the 9th century B.C.E. in imitation of the Assyrian custom of erecting stelae, at the very time that Assyria began its westward advancement. If he is correct, then we should not speak of possible royal inscriptions of David and Solomon at all. It seems to me, however, that this argument denies any potential influence from Egypt in this regard. Of course, given my view expressed herein, these are moot points for me.
- 5 On the pronunciation of the name Akkayush, see Eph’al (1999: 5).
- 6 Though see also Garr 1985: 150, n. 55a.
- 7 The attempt by Rogerson and Davies (1996) to date the tunnel and the inscription to the Maccabean period has been refuted by a series of scholars in a follow-up article (Hackett et al. 1997).
- 8 Some have doubted that the root צנע means “be humble,” especially in the Micah passage (see Andersen and Freedman [2000: 529–30] for recent discussion). But later Hebrew (Ben Sira and Mishnaic) and Aramaic usage shows this to be the meaning of the verb quite clearly (see the brief discussion in Vargon 1994: 182). Chen (2000: 109) has identified צנע as a northern lexeme, based on its two occurrences in the Bible, Mic 6:8 and Prov 11:2, in contrast to the standard terms כנע and ענו. On Proverbs as a northern compilation, see Chen (2000); on Micah 6–7 as a northern text, see Burkitt (1926), van der Woude (1971), and Ginsberg (1982: 25–26). The presence of צנע in Ben Sira is the result of direct influence from Proverbs, as per Chen.
- 9 See Mendelssohn (1956: 19–20) for this specific parallel.
- 10 The Chronicler uses the expression גבה לבי “his heart was haughty” in one other place, 2 Chr 26:16, concerning Uzziah. Quite unexpectedly, the phrase ויגבה לבי “his heart was high” predicated of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chr 17:6 carries a positive connotation (see Japhet 1993: 747).
- 11 My interest here is the critique of the kings of Israel and Judah, but it is important to note that foreign kings also are criticized for their boastful claims. See, for example, 2 Kgs 19:21–28 = Isa 37:22–29 (concerning Sennacherib, king of Assyria) and Isa 14:4–21 (concerning “the king of Babylon”).
- 12 The tomb cannot be identified definitively as that of Shevna, because the deceased’s name is broken in the inscription. Only three final letters remain, namely, יהי-, and of course this tells us very little. The typical

- assumption is that the full name of this individual is שבניהו "Shevnyahu," of which the biblical Shevna is a hypocoristicon. Certainly, this is the conclusion of virtually every major scholar who has studied the text and who has pondered the point. See most importantly Avigad (1953) and Ahituv (1992: 27–29).
- 13 A second epitaph is found on the tomb of Zera'yahu adjoining that of Shevna/Shevnyahu; see Reifenberg (1948) and Ahituv (1992: 30–31).
- 14 Actually, even if the tomb discovered in Silwan is not that of the biblical Shevna, the point remains, for this individual "is attacked by the prophet in a bitter confrontation for having built himself a splendid private tomb. The prophet announces the divine judgment against this act of arrogance in the most violent language possible" (Childs 2001: 161). See also Hurowitz (2000–2001: 137–38), who noted the contrast between Isaiah's words מרום קברו "the height of his tomb" concerning Shevna (Isa 22:16), and Moses's burial בני "in a ravine" (Deut 34:6) in line with the latter's aforementioned humility.
- 15 The Egyptian expression is *ʿ3 ib*, literally "big of heart," meaning "proud, arrogant," for which see Lichtheim (1973: 76 n. 6). The expression occurs in lines 52 and 178 according to the enumeration system of Dévaud (1916) and Žába (1956).
- 16 Though I admit that the exact sense of קלה גבה "his voice is haughty" is not clear. See further Lindenberg (1983: 93).
- 17 As Hurowitz (1992: 227–32) has noted, it is possible that 1 Kgs 6:1–2 is based on "some sort of building inscription or a votive inscription from the temple itself, written by one of the Tyrian or Byblian workmen involved in the project." This would be a quasi-exception to my main point, but to some extent it is the exception which proves the rule. The only passage in the Bible that may hark back to an inscription available to the author(s) of Kings (and/or his sources) is written not by an Israelite but by a Phoenician. Though, in any case, the presumed text would not be a royal inscription, which is our main concern here. On Phoenicianisms in the Temple building account of 1 Kings 6–8, see the brief treatment in Rendsburg (1990: 29–30). A full treatment of this topic remains a desideratum. At this point, I would note just two other examples of Phoenicianisms in these chapters, namely, פַעַם as a unit of measurement in 1 Kgs 7:4 (see further Mulder 1988), and יָבֹל "exalted, princely" in 1 Kgs 8:13 (attested in Ugaritic and Phoenician).
- 18 In a delightful book written for children, *Cleopatra VII: Daughter of the Nile* (Gregory 1999), the 12-year-old future pharaoh is depicted as already learned, spending time in Alexandria's famed museum and library, having read the literature of many peoples, including the Bible (Septuagint, of course). As she realizes that one day she may be pharaoh of Egypt, she is inspired by these very two ladies: "That is why I study royals from the past, because I can follow their examples. The Queen of Sheba so desired in her heart to have knowledge, that she rode by caravan all the way to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon, the wisest man on Earth. Queen Esther of Persia saved her Jewish people from slaughter by bravely standing before King Xerxes" (p. 75). Note that no "queens" of Israel and Judah can be invoked for inspiration.
- 19 In addition, of course, גבירה derives from a different root than מלך "king," מלכה "queen," etc. Standard treatments of the *gevira* are Andreasen (1983) and Ben-Barak (1991). For more recent discussion on specific issues, see the series of articles by Spanier (1994a; 1994b; 2000).
- 20 For more details on these queens, see respectively: Kozloff and Bryan (1992: 41–43); Hornung (1999: 36); Kitchen (1982: 98–100); Otten (1975; for a brief summary see van den Hout [1995: 1112]); and Batto (1974: 8–23). For more general information on queens in ancient Egypt, see Troy (1986). I know of no similar study on the queens of Mesopotamia, a fact most probably due to the paucity of information; see Batto (1974: 8). For a brief statement on the situation in Hatti, see Hoffner (1995: 564–65).
- 21 Heltzer (1982: 184) concluded that the mother of the king had more influence than the wife of the king, but the evidence is not clear on this point, and he may have overstated the case. The problem lies in the fact that the word *mlkt* is used in both contexts, and we cannot be sure to which royal female it applies at all times. In a letter such as *CTU 2.30:1 lmlkt u[m]y* "to the queen, my mother," obviously the mother of the king is addressed. But in a letter such as *CTU 2.21:2–3, [l]mlkt u[grt] [a]hty* "to the queen of Ugarit, my sister," one should assume that the wife of the king is addressed. Heltzer (1982: 182), however, understood the latter as addressed to the queen-mother, and thus he may have exaggerated the influence of this individual.
- 22 This process could transcend generations, as demonstrated by the presence of Šarelli at the coronation of her grandson Ammurapi of Ugarit; see Singer (1999: 691). One should assume the same situation in Judah in 1 Kgs 15:10 where the name of Asa's "mother" is Maacah bat Abishalom, the same individual who was mother of Asa's father and predecessor Abijam in 1 Kgs 15:2 (though other scenarios are possible).

- See further Arbeli 1985. For a documented case of a failed attempt to place one's son on the throne, by Tiy, a secondary wife of Rameses III, see de Buck (1937).
- 23 For a thorough study of this position, see Bin-Nun (1975).
- 24 Frankfort (1948) approached the data from the opposite end, that is, he began with the world of the divine and then turned to the world of man. Nevertheless, this classic study still may be consulted profitably.
- 25 Though in this instance the wording could be factitive. The Chronicler, to be sure, understood 1 Kgs 8:62–63 literally, for he omitted this passage from the book of Chronicles; see Gray (1970: 232).
- 26 2 Chr 26:16–21 relates how Uzziah attempted to offer incense in the Temple but was prevented from doing so by the priests. As is often the case when Chronicles includes information lacking from Kings, it is difficult to judge the historicity of this episode. This could be simply a matter of the Chronicler attempting to explain how an otherwise good king (see 2 Kgs 15:3) was stricken with leprosy (2 Kgs 15:5), thus the expanded account in Chronicles. On rabbinic explorations into this passage, see Aptowitzer (1931: 142–45; reference courtesy of Prof. Victor Hurowitz of Ben-Gurion University).
- 27 The term “official religion” is one which scholars prefer not to use nowadays. I still find it convenient, however, to use the term as the sum of Israel's religious beliefs as expressed in the Bible. See Weinfeld (1987: 481) and Rendsburg (1995: 2–3).
- 28 This would be more or less in line with Ben-Barak (1991: 34), who argued that the *gevira* had “no official political status in the kingdom.”
- 29 For a succinct presentation of how Israel's understanding of Yahweh differed from the general ancient Near Eastern theology, see Weinfeld (1987: 481–82).
- 30 One will agree with Weinfeld (1996: 528): “In sum, there is a great difference between belief and practice in ancient Israel. The *hieros gamos* as a divine principle has been elaborated, especially in the mystic literature, which flourished in the Kabbalah. However, the religion of Israel prohibited the performance of any ceremony regarding the *hieros gamos*.”
- 31 It is a pleasure to thank my colleague Jeffrey R. Zorn for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Note added in proof:

After this article was in press, I learned of the existence of a fragment of a second monumental inscription from Jerusalem, this one from the City of David excavations. Once more it is extremely fragmentary, with only four letters legible, and the text does not allow any major conclusions. For the *editio princeps*, see J. Naveh, Hebrew and Aramaic Inscriptions. Pp. 1–2 in *Excavations at the City of David, 1978–1985*, ed. D. Ariel. Qedem 41. Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000. For additional remarks, see F. M. Cross, A Fragment of a Monumental Inscription from the City of David. *Israel Exploration Journal* 51 (2001) 44–47. Cross's suggestion that this inscription may be related to the story of Hezekiah's appeal for offerings (2 Chr 31:3–9) is most intriguing. Nevertheless, one still cannot claim this text to be a royal inscription.

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