

"WORLD DOMINION" IN YAHWEH KINGSHIP PSALMS:
DOWN TO THE ROOTS OF GLOBALIZING CONCEPTS
AND STRATEGIES

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I. Yahweh's Kingship

1. *Universal Reign*

Although a good number of literary and compositional problems remain unsolved,¹ the cluster of Psalms 93 through 100 (plus Psalm 47) does feature some remarkable and in a way unique theological concepts in comparison to many other layers of the Hebrew Scriptures. Among them, the idea of Yahweh's dominance over the whole world and all nations, no doubt, is the most prominent, comparable only to the preaching of Second Isaiah and some wisdom discourses in the Book of Job.² What, in effect, is the exact meaning and location of such claims for a universal reign encompassing the entirety of earthly beings and all geographic regions? How did they come about in terms of cultural and religious history? Since we ourselves are—economically, politically, ideologically—very much involved in complicated issues of globalization, our interests in the beginnings of a unified world to be ruled by just one superior power is undeniable. Of course, such actual interest may cloud or distort recognition of ancient outlooks and evaluations. Be that as it may, we should venture a fresh look at the Psalter and at some evidence from the ancient Near East in order to get a fuller perspective on unified government over a unified world.

¹To name but a few: Why has Psalm 47 been separated from the group, or has it not? What is the function of Psalm 94 within the cluster of kingship texts? Can we really postulate a lucid scheme of composition in Psalms 93 to 100? To what specific end has the compilation taken place? Cf. the most recent commentaries on the Psalms: Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 51-100* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 643-713; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2* (FOTL XV; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 173 - 206.

²Cf., for example, Isa 44:6-8, 24-28; 49:1-6, 22-26; 52:7-12; Job 38-41.

2. Yahweh the Supreme God

The psalms we are discussing focus on Israel's God, as a great many hymns in the ancient Near East customarily do in regard to determined central deities. Divine power and authority are being enhanced (cf. Psalm 29). Singing and shouting to his or her honor in a very substantial, material way "brings about" that very glory, splendor, and strength demanded from adorants, be they celestial or human ones. Small wonder, therefore, that the Yahweh kingship songs instigate that glorification ("Sing to Yahweh . . .," Ps 96:1-3) and at the same time heap on God honorific attributions: Yahweh, God of Israel, is the "awesome Most High" (עליון כור), the "Great king" (מלך גדול), the "King of all the earth" (כל הארץ) (מלך)³ He has taken up monarchic government—the famous phrase is, with slight variations, מֶלֶךְ אֱלֹהִים (יהוה).⁴ Now he is executing his divine offices and responsibilities: as the creator of "heaven and earth" to provide good living conditions, to combat evil powers and sustain the just ones, to let shine forth his power to his own glorification. All these functions of a supreme deity are being portrayed, as it seems, in a universalistic way, in terms of time and space, as well as in the political and religious realms.

Geographically speaking, the reign of Yahweh covers all the world; politically, the sum total of nations is affected. Emphatic designation of his reign's territorial extension over "all the earth" (כל הארץ; cf. Pss 47:3, 8; 97:5, 9) corresponds to his overlordship over "all the Gods" (כל אלהים; cf. Pss 95:3; 96:4) and obeisance of "all the nations" (כל העמים; cf. Pss 47:2; 96:3; 99:2), and "the peoples" (הגוים; cf. Pss 96:3, 10; 98:2). Is this mere exaggerating, poetical rhetoric which disregards reality and in fact only envisions the small world of local interests around one's own church steeple? Hardly so. Evidence of a universal outlook may come from that special term תבל, frequently used in the Psalms, meaning the "inhabited world," "full disk floating upon the primeval

³Ps 47:3, 8; similar titles and attributes in Pss 93:3; 96:4,6.

⁴Pss 47:9; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1. Comparable is the enthronization shout for human kings (2 Kings 9:13).

waters."⁵ As such, תבל is a synonym of ארץ, "rims of the earth."⁶ The universal perspective comes to the fore vividly in those cosmological (and eschatological?) judgment scenarios, extant also in two Yahweh kingship texts: Pss 96:10-13; 98:7-9). The first one is an opportune example:

Say among the nations [גוים], "Yahweh is king!
The world [תבל] is firmly established; it shall not be moved.
He will judge the peoples [עמים] with equity."
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth [ארץ] rejoice;
let the sea [ים] roar, and all that fills it;
let the field [שד] exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before Yahweh; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth [ארץ].
He will judge the world [תבל] with righteousness,
and the peoples [עמים] with his truth.
(Ps 96:10-13; NRSV, except for "Yahweh")

The vocabulary of worldwide rule includes geographical and political terms. "Peoples" in this context refers to "foreign nations," they are here named גוים and עמים. Another most conspicuous one is לאמים "people," which occurs only in poetic/liturgical contexts, including in Ps 47:4.⁷ All the people on the earth, is the seemingly preposterous claim, are subjects of Yahweh, Israel's God. This affirmation coincides with so many in ancient Near Eastern and Persian hymnic and political statements, made on behalf of imperial state gods and their human emperors, as we shall see. Geographical designations of our passage

⁵ Pss 93:1; 96:10, 13; 97:4; 98:7, 9; and outside the kingship collection, Pss 24:1; 33:8; 50:12; 89:12; H.-J. Fabry and N. van Meeteren, ThWAT VIII, 547-554. Both authors emphasize the late, i.e. exilic/post-exilic, use of the term and its uncertain etymological background. Derivation from the Akkadian *tfbalu*, "dry land," is possible.

⁶ Ps 98:3; cf. Pss 2:8; 59:14; 72:8; Isa 45:22; 52:10; Jer 16:19; Zech 9:10.

⁷ Thirteen times in the Psalter: Pss 2:1; 7:8; 9:9; 44:3, 15; 47:4; 57:10; 65:8; 67:5; 105:44; 108:4; 148:11; 149:7, and prominent in Second Isaiah (cf. Isa 41:1; 43:4, 9-10; 49:1; 51:4; 55:4). H.D. Preuss affirms that the word primarily means other nations in opposition to Israel and that it is typically part of scenarios describing Yahweh's world governance (ThWAT IV, 412-413).

above include תבל, ארץ, ים, שרי, and they all can carry mythical and universalistic connotations. One more expression belonging into this line is איים, "islands" or "coastlands," occurring quite frequently in Second Isaiah and once in the kingship psalms.⁸ The cluster of concepts which should be augmented by notions of enemies, opponents,⁹ creation works and their liturgical backgrounds, garments and royal implements, etc., is indicative of a cohesive mental picture of one world under the "jurisdiction" of Yahweh, the creator of the universe. Noticeable are the inclusion of all peoples in a kind of final judgment and the partaking of foreign leaders in a kind of covenant ceremony:

Clap your hands, all you peoples [עמים];
shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For Yahweh, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth [כל־הארץ].
(Ps 47:2-3, NRSV vv.1-2)

God is king over the nations [גוים];
God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples [גריבי עמים] gather
as they people [עם] of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth [מגני־ארץ] belong to God;
he is highly exalted. (Ps 47:9-10; NRSV vv.8-9)¹⁰

⁸Isa 41:1, 5; 42:4, 10, 12, 15; 49:1; 51:5; Ps 97:1. The notion is of inhabited places at the far rim of the earth-disk floating on the primeval ocean. The globalizing aspects can be seen neatly, e.g. in Isa 42:10-12, a "summons to worship" for all the world: "Sing to Yahweh a new song,/ his praise from the end of the earth!/ Let the sea roar and all that fills it,/ the coastlands [איים] and their inhabitants./ ... Let them give glory to Yahweh,/ and declare his praise in the coastlands [איים]."

⁹In the kingship psalms, Yahweh's opponents are partly depicted, in a mythical way, as primeval forces of chaos who have to acclaim his sovereignty: "The floods have lifted up, O Yahweh,/ the floods have lifted up their voice;/ the floods lift up their roaring" (Ps 93:3).

¹⁰The terms used for world leadership ("princes," "shields," v. 10) are highly poetical and honorific, but hardly used as titles in common language. "Shield," of course, belongs to the military sphere, and occurs as divine epitheton, e.g. in Pss 18:3, 31; 33:20; 59:12; 144:1-2. "Prince," strangely enough, literally means "volunteer" or "benefactor"; the word is rooted most of all in cultic language. Perhaps the idea behind the designation is this: national leaders have to be wealthy, in order to be able to give freely and abundantly to God and their subjects; cf. Joachim Conrad, ThWAT V, 237-245.

There is little doubt that Yahweh is being portrayed in the kingship psalms with colors taken from mythopoetic, priestly-liturgical, and royal-administrative backgrounds. In each one of these realms we may detect tendencies of construing the world as a unified entity. The open question is: In which way did the Hebrew psalmists work out this concept within the broader stream of ancient Near Eastern and Persian traditions? Again, we have to alert ourselves to the possible distorting influence of modern concepts of homogeneity in world interpretation, linked to a millenary history of monotheistic and scientific thinking.¹¹

3. Benefits for Israel

Concepts of the world, "worldviews," are always rooted in determined social and cultural contexts. They are not abstract and disinterested designs, fallen from heaven like meteors. Even universalistic explanations of the world are being contrived from particular vantage points, usually from some center of real or imagined authority. Given an integral outlook on time and space, we should not hastily conclude that the basis and origin of encompassing views is equally far-reaching and universal. Emanuel Kant's material and spiritual home was a tiny city named Königsberg in a small kingdom called Prussia. It was from this angle that the famous philosopher designed his overall picture of the universe. His mental frame truly did not correspond with the horizons of his living place, but, on the other hand, it somehow was confined by the local, eastern European worldview. Vice versa, the concepts of the "kingdom of Yahweh" in the Psalter were nurtured by an insignificant people. Yahweh had a counterpart in "his" people of Israel. We thus have reason to look for the interrelationship between God and people, i.e., for the center of interest within the kingship psalms. Astonishingly, there is no royal institution visible in these psalms which could serve as an administrator of divine orientations.

In my opinion, our collection clearly bears witness to its origin and use, lacking a monarchic system of implementation. There are conspicuous

¹¹Astrophysicists, for instance, seem to be compelled by Western tradition to search for the pinpoint, exclusive beginning of celestial "history," the "Urknall," to be localized exactly in time and space, a totally absurd undertaking for Hindu or Buddhist thinkers.

occurrences of the first person plural in some texts, which make the best sense when attributed to the exilic or post-exilic community of faithful Judahites. Recent research leads to that conclusion.¹² The assumption is that a plurality of persons joining in hymn singing barely reflects vertical monarchic but rather horizontal community structures. In fact, the communal "we" seems to be extremely rare in comparable ancient Near Eastern sacral texts. In the Psalter, however, this stylistic form abounds. Examples taken from the kingship group are: Pss 47:4-5, 7; 95; 98:3; 99:5, 8, 9. Among these passages are invocations of "Yahweh, our God," affirmations that he "chose and saved Israel" and "put peoples [GPOKⁱ?] under our feet" (Ps 47:4),¹³ and most of all a kind of liturgical summons to Deuteronomistic preaching:

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before Yahweh, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice . . . (Ps 95:6-7; NRSV)

It seems obvious that first the community is speaking or, respectively, a liturgist in the name of his or her congregation. Then, abruptly, it is Yahweh's own voice, communicated by some speaker or mediator of the divine word (vv. 7c-11), addressing directly the assembled crowd in the second person plural, pleading for obedience over against God's manifest will and orientation. Style, form, and content are very much like so many admonitions and warnings in the book of Deuteronomy

¹²Two studies so far have pointed out this relationship: Joseph Scharbert, "Das 'Wir' der Psalmen auf dem Hintergrund altorientalischen Betens," in *Freude an der Weisung des Herrn* (ed. Ernst Haag, et al; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1986), 297-324; Klaus Seybold, "Das 'Wir' in den Asaph-Psalmen," in *Neue Wege in der Psalmenforschung* (ed. K. Seybold, et al; Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1994), 143-155. I myself have extensively utilized the evidence in *Psalms, Parts 1 and 2* (FOTL XIV and XV).

¹³Within the kingship psalms, this is the only occurrence, but cf. Pss 2:1; 9:9; 44:3, 15; 57:10; 65:8; 67:5; 105:44; 108:4; 117:1; 148:11; Isa 34:1; 41:1; 43:4, 9; 49:1; 55:4; Horst-Dietrich Preuss, ThWAT IV, 411-413. The term "overborders the limits of Israel, in order to demonstrate YHWH's power over peoples and nations" (413).

and other Deuteronomistic literature.¹⁴ Reading this text, we are entering, so to speak, the lecture hall of Judahite communities.

Given the *Sitz im Leben* of early Judaic worship services either in Babylonia or at home, the theological contents of the Yahweh kingship psalms fall in line. Israel, or the "pride of Jacob" (Ps 47:5), the "people of Abraham's God" (Ps 47:10), the "people of his pasture, sheep of his hand" (Ps 95:7), the "faithful," "righteous," and "upright in heart" (Ps 97:10-12), is the partner of that universal deity who is in real command of the extant, contemporary empire. "He has fashioned us, not we ourselves; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture," as Ps 100:3 aptly summarizes. Yahweh wields all powers over the nations; they are—just like Israel herself—offered a chance to acknowledge his rule (cf. Pss 47:5-9; 96:7-9). If they do not comply, adorers of worthless idols will perish or be compelled to praise the supreme god (cf. Pss 93; 96:5-6, 13; 97:6-7; 98:9). It is God's own people which is at the center of world affairs. On behalf of Israel, Yahweh's universal rule is being executed and administered. Israel's privileged position as a chosen people also transpires in Ps 93:5. The "decrees" or "testimonies" (עֲדוּת) apparently refer to the Torah for all the world, while Psalm 95 recounts the reception of Torah in the wilderness (cf. Exod 17:1-7; 19-34). Significantly, in the kingship psalms there are hardly any polemics against the "other" gods, as we are accustomed to encounter in many prophetic texts (cf. Isa 13-23; Jer 46-51).

II. World Dominion in the Ancient Near East

1. *Conditions of Universal Concepts*

We have now to consider the background of ancient Near Eastern concepts of world government in order to understand better what the Psalms are talking about. An adequate point of departure is the cultural and religious history of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Persia, which we can

¹⁴ Commentators agree on this affinity to Deuteronomistic sources. A prime example is the preaching of Deut 29:9-14; 30:11, 15-20.

undertake only ephemerally and cursorily at this point. "Worldviews" in general to a large part depend on ways and degrees of social organization. We are hardly able to develop visions of family, clan, village, urban center, state, or nation without ever have experienced these specific forms of life. Therefore, the concept of government over a more or less unified world hardly can antedate real experiences with imperial states. Where and when are we allowed to talk about multi-ethnic entities which deserve the characterization of "empire?" Since when have imperial rulers claimed to occupy and rule over the "whole" of the earth? Consequently, our query is for developing political structures, their mental profiles and religious rationales.

It is a well-known fact that the ancient Near East has been the cradle of humanity in a very special sense. It was in the fertile crescent that, at about ten thousand years B.C.E., migrating groups of hunters and gatherers invented agricultural methods, turned sedentary, and formed larger settlements. By the fourth millennium B.C.E., the tightly organized political model of "city-states" under clannish or monarchic leadership had emerged, the history of which we are able to trace in written documents through the third millennium B.C.E. Inter-city and territorial political entities soon sprang up. And during the periods called "Early Dynastic" and "(Old) Akkadian" (roughly 2800 to 2100 B.C.E.), the first larger conglomerations of power begin to appear. It is this trajectory of a social unfolding from agnatically construed, small-scale groups via tribal associations, neighborhood communities, various forms of state government towards multiple stages of imperial organization that does constitute the background of our search for effective ideas of world dominion under the rule, as it where, of gods and their earthly regents. Ancient Near Eastern texts, mostly of the royal and hymnic genres, make it abundantly clear that the developments of political bodies and their mental models from "natural" smallness to gigantic conglomerates really took place step by step in the three millenniums of the pre-Christian era, culminating with the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman empires. Many details still remain clouded from our view, and quite often experts disagree in evaluating extant facts, but the varying notions of society and statehood in the ancient Near East stand out in the relevant literatures. Hebrew Scriptures and also the kingship psalms are part of this tradition, and hopefully can

be placed into this wider context. I venture to point out a few relevant steps in the process, drawing chiefly on royal inscriptions of two millennia. Mythical and liturgical texts should be consulted as well, but limited space and time are prohibiting a fuller probe into these materials at this time.

2. Third Millennium Beginnings

For the Sumerians, "kingship" was the most logical form of government. It "descended from heaven," casting anchor, so to speak, in successive Sumerian cities like Eridu, Bad-tibira, Larak, Sippar, Shuruppak ("before the flood"), and Kish, Uruk, Ur ("after the flood").¹⁵ The early and basic extensions of royal power were the limits of the respective city-state. Most frequently, the titles *lugal*, literally "great man," and *ensi*, "ruler, governor"¹⁶ or perhaps "priestly prince," denoting political and religious competence, are combined with the native city, e.g. Urnanshe (ca. 2550 B.C.E.)¹⁷ *lugal/ensi* of Lagash or Lugalzagesi (ca. 2350 B.C.E.), and *lugal/ensi* of Umma.

The ideological and theological background of Sumerian and Akkadian royal titles in the third millennium, of course, is very important for us. As long as the city-states existed side by side, each one adhered to its own deities. Growing prestige and power of some cities also elevated particular gods and goddesses to more prominent positions. The claims of higher authority of determined rulers and their divine city patrons or matrons intertwined, promoting each other mutually. Such an extension of divine power and authority certainly was concomitant with Sumerian outreaches to and conquests of the hostile mountainous regions to the north and east. All this means to say is that in pre-Sargonic times, Sumerian centers of power (city-states) were on their way to expand their spheres of influence

¹⁵ The so-called "Sumerian King List" was probably compiled at the end of the third millennium utilizing older materials; cf. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (AS 11; Chicago: University Press, 1939); Dietz O. Edzard, "Königslisten und Chroniken. A. Sumerisch," RIA VI, 1980, 77-86.

¹⁶ William W. Hallo, *Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles* (AOS 43; New Haven: University Press, 1953), 45; there had been in use a more archaic title *en*, "overlord," down to the Akkad period.

¹⁷ Approximate dates according to J. Nicholas Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia* (London / New York: Routledge, 1992), and the *Cambridge Ancient History* (London: Cambridge University Press).

towards the peripheries. They already legitimated their claims for dominion by theological affirmations, alleging superior authority of their own gods. The dominant city with its central temple becomes the hub of the world, as far as military and economic dominance are concerned.¹⁸

The empire founded by king Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2350 B.C.E.), basically run by Semitic speaking ethnic groups who nevertheless seem to have been fully integrated into Sumerian traditions, takes further steps into the same direction. In large inscriptions, Sargon, "King of Agade," gives a comprehensive survey of all his battles won, cities and territories taken over. Kings are considered the vice-regents of sovereign highest deities, be they Anu, Enlil, Ishtar, Suen, or others. Conferring their divine power not only in the domestic sphere but also over other nations and kings to the elected one in some capital of Sumer and Akkad seems to be a topic as early as King Lugalzagesi of Umma, defeated thereafter by contemporary Sargon of Akkad.

We should be cautious, however. Later readers, especially we ourselves, working subconsciously with experiences of subsequent historical periods, tend to project a coherent and universal world order into ancient texts. Acknowledging an ideal construction of ancient worldviews from the imperial rulers' own vantage points (center to periphery), we do not really know whether these designs have been all-inclusive or not. Enemies are beaten down, their domains incorporated into the victorious state. The king triumphantly tells about his deeds, but does he really negate every possible other political competitor beyond the rims of his sphere of influence? Trade relations with distant peoples and cultures teach a different lesson. The tendency to claim all inclusive authority apparently has been virulent in some way. But was it a rational and pragmatic motion? Or the other way around: our own concepts of "one God, one world" certainly have been shaped by a long Christian and scientific tradition of a completely homogeneous, mono-causal world. Obviously, it is difficult for us to abstract from this modern worldview. Looking at the ancient texts as pragmatically as possible, it seems that much of the energy of dominating all the earth, already present in these ancient rulers, was clad

¹⁸ Cf. Stefan M. Maul, "Die altorientalische Hauptstadt – Abbild und Nabel der Welt," and A.R. George, "'Bond of the Lands': Babylon, the Cosmic Capital," in *Die orientalische Stadt* (ed. Gemot Wilhelm; CDOG 1; Saarbrücken: SDV), 109-145.

in mythopoetic concepts of winning and maintaining control within a large part of that world, comprising Mesopotamia and some of its neighboring territories to the east, north, and west, e.g. Elam, Mari, Ebla, etc. The rest of the world, which certainly was known to exist beyond the neighboring states, did not matter too much yet, being included in a vague way ("four corners," "all foreign nations," etc.).

3. *Second Millennium and into the First*

After the decline of the Akkad Empire towards the end of the third millennium, some more locally restricted rulers figure prominently on the historical stage, like Gudea, King of Lagash and environs, famous for his temple building activities, and the third dynasty of Ur, dominating much of Mesopotamia and some eastern and northern territories roughly between 2100 and 2000 B.C.E. Apparently we cannot speak of real, universal political ambitions during this period, yet some of the older concepts linger on.¹⁹ The extreme power going out from the temple and the presence of the mighty, heavenly god is quite often described as a "frightening glare" which "fills" the world.²⁰ Even if Gudea does not accumulate so many royal titles reaching beyond his home territories, the innermost drive to look outward from the center place into the world beyond is quite visible in the texts. And humanly speaking, it is familiar to all of us, especially in our individualized modernity.²¹ Ur III rulers more

¹⁹ Cf. Walther Sallaberger, "Ur III – Zeit," in *Mesopotamien* (ed. P. Attinger and M. Wäfler; OBO 160/3; Freiburg / Göttingen: Universitätsverlag / Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 119-390. Political reality possibly contradicts religious belief, in that the rulers from Šulgi onward use the more ambitious title of "King of the four corners" (p. 180). But to me it remains dubious whether or not at this early time the formula had a universal connotation (cf. Hallo, *Titles*, 49-56). The same doubt is even stronger in regard to the divine determination of royal names of the period. Divination of the king does not indicate a universal worldview of his subjects or courtiers (differently Gerd Steiner, "Altorientalische Reichsvorstellungen im 3. Jahrtausend," in *Power and Propaganda* [ed. M. T. Trolle; Mesopotamia 7; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1979], 134), which appears to be a modern monotheistic projection.

²⁰ Cf. Friedhelm Hartenstein, *Die Unzugänglichkeit Gottes im Heiligtum* (WMANT 75; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 69-76; and Thomas Podella, *Das Lichtkleid JHWHs* (FAT 15; Tübingen: Mohr, 1996).

²¹ Horst Eberhard Richter, a psychiatrist, labels modern human drive for total autonomy as an autistic effort to fill the vacuum left by the banishment of God from reality (*Der Gotteskomplex* [Hamburg: Rowolt Verlag, 1979]).

or less fall into line with those of Gudea and their predecessors formulaic language as far as royal titles or the description of divine potentialities are concerned. They all, with the exception of Ur-nammu, use the title "king of the four corners."²² Only the exact meaning, to my mind, is not clear at that point.

The second millennium — the periods of mere city-states having more or less passed by — is filled with hegemonial struggles between territorial states of comparable size and power; Babylonia, Assyria, Hatti, Egypt, Elam, Mari, Amurru, Mitanni, and others. The outlook on the world remains about the same: affirmations of superior or seemingly all-encompassing power, reality of wars with strong neighbors.²³ The monarch's functions, however, are circumscribed solely in regard to his own people and land. Administration of justice, in the first place, and protection against intruders, are all to the benefit of the "black-haired" Mesopotamians (Codex Hammurapi I,1-41), not for anything like a world-population. Nevertheless, Hammurapi's reign has been very intimately linked with the ascent of the god Marduk, and vice versa. Power was understood in terms of superhuman capability, endowed in the king, but still it was visualized more in actual national structures than in an overarching world society.²⁴

The Assyrians brought a new, aggressive dimension into the world dominion concepts. Not only did they pointedly take up age-old traditions of empire, sometimes taking the rulers of Akkad as their spiritual

²² Cf. F. Thureau-Dangin, *Die sumerischen und akkadischen Königsinschriften* (Leipzig: 1907), 191-196; and Sallaberger, "Ur III-Zeit," 123, 180.

²³ Thus Hammurapi, in his prologue to the famous law stipulations, claims successive installment of the god Marduk, his capital city Babylon, and her regent Hammurapi.

²⁴ It certainly would be of great interest to look at some contemporary non-Semitic-speaking nations, e.g. of Hittite or Egyptian provenance. Although there may be noticed Mesopotamian influences in Asia Minor and tendencies of deifying the living or deceased monarch, we are probably justified in stating that the worldviews in both neighboring cultures focused on the respective own lands, and that an outreach for universal dominance at least does not seem to have been a primary concern. For the Hittite kingdom, cf. Albrecht Goetze, *Kleinasien* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft III,1, vol. 3/III/1; München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1957), 88-90; 135-146. The Pharaohs of Egypt, for their part, were gods or god-like, but even in the period of greatest expansion and opening up towards the foreign parts of the world (New Kingdom, about 1500-1100 B.C.E.), Egyptians thought more in terms of isolation from barbarous "other ones" than of incorporating all territories until the end of the earth (cf. Jan Assmann, *Ägypten, eine Sinngeschichte* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996], 171-173, 232-242).

and political forbears, they also developed their own mastery of war techniques, political organization, and religious ethos on behalf of imperial expansion.²⁵ The reasons for their peculiar ways of striving for and building up their hegemony may be sought in a mixture of ethnic traits, economic and political situations prevalent in the upper Tigris region, and faith in the supreme national deity, the (all)mighty Aššur. Highest heavenly authority then is communicated to the royal administrator of Aššur's rule on earth.²⁶

It was this supreme deity which commanded the Assyrian armies to march south- and westwards and occupy all territories. "By the command of Aššur" is a constant legitimating phrase in extant royal inscriptions.²⁷ They are, consequently, painstaking in listing military

²⁵The widespread fame of Assyrians being cruel warriors and ruthless exploiters of their power position echoes in ancient Near Eastern documents, among them some prophetic writings (cf. Isa 10:5).

²⁶As, for instance, in one of the earliest inscriptions of the empire: "God Aššur, great Lord, who properly administers all the gods, grantor of sceptre and crown, sustainer of sovereignty . . ." [following are hymnic invocations of equally great, yet somehow subordinated, deities: Enlil, Sin, Šamaš, Adad, Ninurta, and finally Ištar] "foremost among the gods, mistress of tumult, who adorns battles ..." [then the king is introduced as] "unrivalled king of the universe, king of the four quarters, king of all princes, lord of lords, chief herdsman, king of kings" (Tiglat-Pileser I [1114-1076 B.C.E.], in his hymnic introduction to an extensive triumphant inscription). Cf. A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millenia (to 1115 B.C.) and the Early First Millenium (1114-859 B.C.)* (RIMA; vol. 2, 13; Toronto: University Press, 1991) (=Tiglat-Pileser 1,1, lines 1-14, 29-30).

Noteworthy is the last part of the honorific list: Dominance is personalized to demonstrate dependence of foreign potentates on the Assyrian "Supreme-King." This feature coincides with the lengthy reports of battles and conquests; it is confirmed by Assyrian vassal treaties, the iconography of Assyrian palaces, and mythological and religious texts, all of which deserve closer attention. In the context of the whole royal report, the old titles "King of Kish" and "King of the four quarters," combined with the designation "unrivalled," now seem to aim at world dominance in a fuller sense than those inscriptions of the third millennium. Still, we have to distinguish between ancient and modern concepts of world rule, as the invocation of seven high gods suggests.

²⁷It is already Šamši-Adad I (1813-1781 B.C.E.) who thus adduces divine instigation for world dominion. Other gods besides Aššur naturally support these ambitions, as e.g. Ištar, "the controller of the entire heaven and underworld" (Grayson, RIMA, vol. 1, 58). Adadnārārī (1305-1474 B.C.E.), e.g. boasts himself of many ambitious titles and epithets, and he describes himself and the interference of his deities like this: "capturer of all people, the king at whose feet the gods Anu, Aššur, Šamaš, Adad, and Ištar made all rules and princes bow down" (Grayson, op. cit., 131).

achievements. They demonstrate a special sensibility for the central importance of the human king (titles, epithets, glorifications). And, most of all, they betray a keen awareness for "political (i.e. imperial) theory." The Assyrian governments tried to impose one and the same "language of obedience" in an ethnically pluralistic world, aiming at an ideologically homogeneous world empire. The Assyrians thus seem to have made significant progress towards modern homogenizing concepts of one worldwide empire. Small wonder, then, that they also developed further (especially since Sargon II [721-705 B.C.E.) not the term itself but the notion and brutal practice of "holy war," that is, of expanding the reign of their national god, laying the grounds, as it were, for later campaigns of this sort.²⁸

4. *Persian World Dominance*

When the states of Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and finally also of the Nile valley broke down under the onslaught of Persian armies, a new empire was formed, the center of which was located to the east of the mountain ranges that limited Mesopotamia, on the Iranian highlands. It is worthwhile to note that the Achaemenian rulers took over a good many customs and rites, political experiences, and religious beliefs found in those ancient cultures they met on their way west. But it is equally obvious that they brought with them views and values of their home cultures, ranging as far as the old eastern Iran. Most of all, the oldest parts of the Avesta, the sacred writings of Iranian religion, apparently go back to the very eastern parts of the Persian Empire. This also means that the religion and culture of the Achaemenians were different from those found in the Near Eastern regions. How did the ancient Persians deal with the complex nature of world rule? What was their design of universal power, if they held any concepts of this kind?

Concentrating on our subject matter, we may affirm that official religion, going back to Zoroaster and superseding older types of religious faith, clearly provided sufficient background for a worldwide government. Ahura

²⁸Cf. Manfred Weippert, "'Heiliger Krieg' in Israel und Assyrien," ZAW 84 (1972): 460-493; and A. Ruffing, *Jahwekrieg als Weltmetapher* (SBB 24; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 1992).

Mazdā, "wise Lord," "Lord of Wisdom," in this faith, was the only and universal creator of heaven and earth, all humankind, and all living beings. The message, communicated by the supreme deity to Zoroaster, his prophet, claimed to be valid for all people regardless of national or racial background. Faith in Ahura Mazdā is meant to be proclaimed to all people on the face of the earth; there is no distinction of ethnic or national bodies. Humankind is divided only into those who will listen and adhere to Ahura Mazdā's teachings and others who will disobey the call to "do, think, and speak" good. There are no national or ethnic strings attached to being a follower of the Truth. At the end of history or after one's own death, respectively, every human being will be judged according to his or her life's results.

The crucial point is personal decision for the good principle, offered and demanded by the "Lord of Wisdom," implemented by Vohu Manah, the "good will" and Aša, the all-ruling "just world order." In contrast to Mesopotamian worldviews, it seems that Zoroastrian faith had neither geographical nor an ultimate dynastic center of gravity, in spite of the fact that Persian rulers felt commissioned by their national god. Their religious politics of relative tolerance to the faith of their subjects seem to presuppose that the universal "wise Lord," who never was called a "king" himself, was operating even in foreign cults under the names of alien deities.²⁹

Before this background, Persian emperors of the Achaemenian dynasty presented themselves as global rulers called and ordained by the creator of the universe, Ahuramazda.³⁰ In the wake of ancient predecessors, they proclaimed themselves "Great Kings," "King of Kings," "King of the countries," and they claimed that Ahuramazda gave to them "power/ empire," with definite universal connotations.³¹ Taken together with those

²⁹ Cf. Mary Boyce, *Under the Achaemenians* (vol. 2 of *A History of Zoroastrianism*; HO 1,8/1,2/2A; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 62-65.

³⁰ The influence of Zoroastrian religion on political philosophy and practices among the Achaemenian rulers is much debated in scholarship. In spite of taking over much of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, etc. concepts, however, the Great Kings of the time did not hide their affiliation to Ahuramazda and Persian traditions.

³¹ The most famous instance is that of the monumental Behistun inscription: Darius I states how he defeated his competitor, the rebellious Gaumata. In consequence of his victory, he says, "According to the will of Ahuramazda I became king. Ahuramazda gave the xšaça to me." Cf. Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (*Die Religionen der Menschheit* 14; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), 139; and Gregor Ahn, *Religiöse Herrscherlegitimation im achämenidischen Iran* (*Acta Iranica* 31; Leiden / Louvain: Brill / Peeters, 1992), 255-277.

affirmations which refer to the kings' reign over "countries," "races," and "all the earth," this terminology of dominion makes a strong case for an underlying concept of "one world"—"one rule." As already pointed out, crucial features in the last mentioned titles appear to be designed not so much from an ancient Mesopotamian perspective of city-states (center and horizon) as from a multi-national basis. The iconography of adoration and support, prevalent in Persian monumental art, is pointing into the same direction.³² In short, Persian religion and the political philosophy of the Achaemenian kings took another step towards a full-fledged idea of worldwide rule of one designated emperor over all the inhabitants of the earth. The theological basis for such thinking seems to have been a special faith in that exclusive god who created the universe and the principle of "good" or "best" human action. The other way around, belief in a universal god in the Persian tradition apparently grew out of experienced instability of social life. Zoroaster himself and his followers may have been on the move, as raisers of cattle, first in the eastern part of the country, then during centuries of "going west." The much older cultures of Mesopotamia originally must have exercised a special fascination for the "barbarians" of the East.

III. Yahweh Kingship within Oriental Traditions

Our task at this point, as I see it, is to evaluate the concepts of world dominion, found in the Yahweh kingship psalms, within the immense stream of imperial traditions of about two millennia extant in ancient Near Eastern and Persian traditions. This means that instead of raising the traditional quests for incomparable qualities of biblical faith, instead of postulating absolute uniqueness for ancient Israelite theological affirmations, I try to understand our particular subject within (not against)

³² Cf. Margaret E. Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art* (Acta Iranica 19; Leiden: Brill, 1979); and Heidemarie Koch and her vivid description of the reliefs of the *apadāna* ("audience-hall") of Persepolis, delegations of twenty-nine peoples bring to the Great King the gifts of their regions and cultures, apparently peacefully, freely bearing their weapons (in Assyrian reliefs, foreign people usually appear as captives bowing down submissively), coming by their own volition (*Es kündigt Dareios der König* [Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt 55; Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1992], 97-120).

its environment. Summarizing provisionally some brief observations which may be drawn from the evidence touched upon (which, of course, needs much closer study), we may say:

1. Ancient Oriental traditions of "world dominion" reflect various tentatives to interpret growing spheres of political (military, economic) influence. The Mesopotamian starting point is a given city-state expanding its reign. In the case of the Persians, occupation of large territories and effective organization of provinces together with a universal type of religious faith may have initiated the move towards world rulership. Both economic and religious motivations should not be underestimated: securing raw materials, controlling routes of commerce, subjecting other peoples to the rule of one's own deity, certainly were powerful forces and, at the same time, legitimizing ideas behind such drives for hegemony.

2. Only such states or national alliances could seriously claim world leadership which outranked possible competitors by a large margin.³³ Israel has hardly had opportunities to cultivate such ambitions on account of her own royal history. Yahweh kingship psalms, however, preaching world dominion, do represent that special tradition which had developed in true empires since the Akkad and a few pre-Sargonic kings. Not even the Davidic-Solomonic "reign" was strong, large, and enduring enough to give rise to any true imperial notions. Israelite communities probably learned to think in terms of worldwide divine authority by contacts with real world powers and world politics. They probably took over those concepts living within the respective political systems.

3. The most logical phases in Israel's history to get involved with slogans and expectations of world dominance would have been the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and the so-called post-exilic periods. Direct contact with troops and administrations of first class powers, with their economy, tributary systems, and religious demands, must have occurred

³³M.T. Larsen counts six Mesopotamian states which justly may be called "empires": the kingdoms of Akkad, Ur III, and the reigns of Old Babylonian, Middle Assyrian, Neo Assyrian, and Neo Babylonian rulers ("The Tradition of Empire in Mesopotamia," in *Power and Propaganda*, 75-103). His criteria are: 1) permanent occupation of vast territories by 2) military garrisons, and 3) division of state into provinces (92). A "center-periphery-model" of state administration prevails in one or another form (92-97).

from the eighth century B.C.E. onward. The tacit influences of such contacts may be seen in the varied expressions of world dominion attributed to Yahweh. Open confrontation with great powers may have been less conducive to using imperial epithets in theology than times of amenable relationships like in the environments of Second Isaiah (cf. the embrace of Cyrus in Isa 44:28; 45:1-7).

4. Like some other neighbors of the Mesopotamian empires, among them also the Persians, Israelite theologians adopted a good many features of their mainstream governmental concepts for theological purposes. They had been developed from the city-state to a vision of ruling the "four corners" or the "totality" of the land. Gradually, such a concept came to include all known countries, among which there was no longer "any equal" in power and authority. From the Akkad empire to the New Assyrian state, thinking about world kingdom moved in more or less the same mold, with contextual variations. Yahweh kingship psalms participate in this stream of tradition.

5. The Persian variant of world dominion utilized Mesopotamian concepts and rites, but it also included a new religious base and new cultural dimensions. Not a city god like Enlil, Ishtar, Marduk, etc., with all their ties to one determined capital, but Ahuramazda, creator of the universe, lord of the good powers, judge of all humankind, victor in the final battle, was the divine overlord of the king. Yahweh remained the god from afar (1 Kings 19), even if he took lodging at his favorite place, Zion. Yahweh betrays little allegiance to royal dynasties (cf. 2 Sam 7; Psalms 2, 89, 132), none in the kingship psalms, but some affinity to Zion-Jerusalem. Most of all, Yahweh is tied to the individual faithful (cf. Psalm 119), reveals himself through prophets, communicates to them his ordinances, judges all nations, demands justice for all, etc.

6. Persian ideas about world rule seem to have been structured more from the people, and the individual person, rather than from top to bottom, i.e. from king and court down to the mass of constituents. Both in Avesta and Hebrew Scripture it is the lay congregation, which is the partner of the deity, markedly also in the Yahweh kingship psalms (cf. Psalm 95). Indeed, the universe seems to be construed on the basis of national and international societies. The decision for faith in the

supreme goodness is paramount. Peoples, consisting of human beings, are supporting the king of the world.

7. Theologically speaking, Persian and Hebrew traditions allow for a certain democratic basic consensus. Personal decision for the right deity is initially important. Adherence to a certain creed, final judgment, importance of living right, the written word (lectures from Bible and Avesta, liturgical use of Scripture) are constituent features of both the biblical and Zoroastrian traditions. A prophet (Moses, Zoroaster, or others), as indicated, is channeling or mediating revelational words to everybody's home. Both creeds thus have an ecumenical outlook which goes hand in hand with the universal rule of the deities.

8. The discovery of a unified world, with all human beings and nations dependent on one ultimate source of life-giving authority, does not contradict earlier "democratic" notions of a plurality of autonomous entities. But there has to be a directing and protecting power which guarantees freedom of individuals and groups. The old world discovered this basic necessity of world organization. At the time this discovery, in fact, has been abused for egocentric and chauvinistic ends. One city, one government subdued others and proclaimed itself the greatest. Israel's early contribution to the problem has been a spiritually dominating god, without reference to human vice-regents (exceptions are messianic concepts, like in Psalms 2, 110; Isa 9:1-6; Ezek 34:23-24; Mic 5:1-5; Zech 9:9-10, etc.). Significantly, the Yahweh kingship hymns on first look are free from human mediation of Yahweh's rule. The kingdom of God in our psalm group comes with Yahweh himself and only with him (cf. New Testament allusions in Mt 4:17; Mk 1:15; Lk 10:9, etc.). Seemingly, the problem of dominance exercised by humans over humans has been avoided.

9. Yet divine rule over all the world, in itself a liberating concept which may guarantee equal standing for all creatures, has to be implemented by human agents, be they individuals, dynasties, or collective bodies of government. Monarchic and imperial structures are obsolete today, because "Western" cultures are based on human rights for each individual person. The burning problems of our present time call for effective leadership and controlling power through the United Nations. Self-appointed authority in world affairs in the long run cannot solve the enigmas of humankind.