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Expression of royal power during the Iron Age in Ancient Israel

ABSTRACT

The royal power was mainly expressed via propaganda during the Iron Age in Ancient Israel. In this sense it should be highlighted that archaeology has facilitated the study of some traces of this propaganda. Some of them are briefly shown in this article.

KEYWORDS

Archaeology, Ancient Israel, Iron Age, Bible, Royal power.

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To begin with, the first thing that should be taken into account is that during the Iron Age, in the Levant there was no difference between the political and religious power. The political and religious power meant the same and the king embodied them both. In this respect, the Bible shows that during the monarchy times the high priest and the king had almost the same rank level¹. This could be seen as a clear anachronism given that at that time and in those monarchies which surrounded the Levant, the high priest was also the king, who was in charge of developing the main religious tasks.

Having said this, it should also be pointed out that the royal power was mainly expressed via propaganda. By utilising the propaganda the king ensured that his subjects bore in mind that he was the biggest political, religious and military authority. Thus, what created the use of propaganda during the Iron Age was the need of monarchs of reminding their subjects of who was the maximum authority.

In this sense it should be highlighted that archaeology has facilitated the study of some traces of this propaganda. A good example of this could be the presence of the royal crest stamp in the minting of coins as well as in the different 'ostraca' which were found in numerous excavations² and also in huge constructions such as royal fortifications³.

Another good example could be the engineering construction of the Hezekiah's tunnel in Jerusalem, which together with the constructions mentioned above could not have been constructed without a minimal state organization. In this sense, the fact that tribal leaders became real kings brought the emergence of a basic and progressive state organization. An example of this can be found in the inscriptions of the period such as the Moabite Stone from Diban. This stone commemorated the victory of

¹ For instance, see 1Cro 29, 22

² For example, the excavations of Lachish

³ For instance the walls or Doors of Hazor, Meggido, Gezer or Lachish (which were described in the Bible and discovered by archaeology) or the Salomon Palace o Temple of Salomon in Jerusalem (which were described in the Book of the Kings)

Mesha, king of Moab over Israel. In this case, the inscription is considered to be a tool of propaganda as it reflects a military victory.

As for the state organization, this had to be maintained by introducing the payment of taxes to citizens. For instance, at the time of Jeroboam II, the prophet Amos criticised the excessive living standard of the leading class of Samaria, the fiscal oppression and the fact that the population, mainly agricultural producers and stock farmers, could become slaves due to debts caused by the expenses of maintaining the royal palace. Thanks to archaeology, this period is known to be notable for its splendour⁴. But the splendour of the leading classes over the population imbalanced the traditional way of organization in clans of different villages. It also caused the enslaving of the families of those agricultural producers or stock farmers who had been deprived of their lands.

And last but not least, it should also be said that another characteristic of the monarchies during the Iron Age was the existence of national and dynastic god⁵. It was not a monotheistic practice but henotheistic. They believed in the existence of many gods but they gave special relevance to a particular one. This was the national or dynastic god, who was the god of the family which reigned at that moment and to whom they owed the fact that they were reigning⁶. For instance this could be seen in Israel and Judah with Yahve as the 'God' as well as in Moab with Kemosh, in Edom with Qaus, in Ammon with Milkom, in Damascus with Baal and in Tiro with Melqart.

The arrival of the Assyrians brought about a change of mind in regards to how the relations between the king and the national god had to be. The Palestinians Kingdoms replaced the Egyptian vassalage with the vassalage for their national god after having sworn allegiance to Him. The Jewish people claim that the agreement dates back to a remote and foundational past.

Through the agreement, God guaranteed the salvation in exchange with absolute and exclusive fidelity. A good example of this fidelity could be found in the idea that vassals could not serve two lords who were confronted. The wording of the

⁴ For instance in Meggido

⁵ Liverani, M. *Israel's History and History of Israel*, London, 2005.

⁶ 'I am who made you king'

agreement in the Bible (for instance, in the Deuteronomy) reflects the Assyrian formula of the swearing allegiance. Therefore, it could be asserted that during the Iron Age, there was in the Levant an Assyrian imperial influence in the way they understand royal and religious conceptions.

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