

The Coronation Rituals: A Comparative Study of the Ancient Hebrew and Vedic Traditions

By Nawaraj Chaulagain

I. Introduction

The coronation ritual, or the royal unction, has been a central kingship ceremony in different cultures, and it is still being practiced in countries where kingship rule is the norm.¹ This is true even in very disparate religious traditions such as the Hebrew in ancient Israel and Vedic in ancient India. The coronation comprised a series of rituals, performed either in the sanctuary or in the palace precincts, through which a person acceded to the throne and assumed the role of the king.² It endowed the king with a position of power and authority of kingship which was ritually invested from, or in the name of, God (Hebrew) or gods (Vedic), often through the mediation of prophets (Hebrew) or priests (Vedic); this position was also acquired from and confirmed by the people or their representatives. The ritual constituted a rite of passage which transformed the new monarch, whether commoner or heir to the throne, into a sacred person worthy of being established in the divine throne.

The ancient Hebrew monarchy lasted for about 500 years; it began with the accession of Saul to the throne at the end of the eleventh century BCE and continued until the Fall of Jerusalem (by the Babylonians) in ca. 587.³ It consisted of two monarchic traditions: the southern and the northern. The southern tradition was formed of the Judean Davidic dynasty, with such illustrious rulers as David and Solomon,⁴ while the northern Israelite kingdom only lasted for over two centuries with 19 different rulers in five dynasties. These ancient Israelite communities, both southern and northern, are often referred to as the 12 tribes (communities of Israelite people). They believed in the kingdom of God, i.e., the belief that God actually ruled over them rather than any earthly leader. Yet, when the Israelite communities were threatened by the outside forces (such as the Philistines), there was a clear need for a leader who could bind them in ties of kinship and faith and protect them from invading forces. A story in the Bible from the Israelite experience tells of the prophet Samuel (of southern Judea), of whom the people demanded a king (1 Samuel 8: 5, 20) to which he replied, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you" (Judges 8:23).⁵ The Israelite people of both the south and the north seemed to have this unshakable belief that it was God Who actually ruled and not any humans, and that they were responsible only to the sovereign rule of God. It was because of this strong conviction that there was possibly no attempt for the revival of the institution of human kingship in the post-exilic era, after ca. 587 BCE.

The situation in ancient India was quite different, with its long history of kingship and thousands of kingdoms spanning from ancient to modern times. Instead of the sovereignty of one God, the Vedic India celebrated and worshiped many gods, despite their belief in one ultimate Truth, and some of those gods were referred to as kings of gods. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (AB), for example, relates that the god Soma was elected king to fight demons.⁶ In the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (TB) and Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (ŚB),⁷ it was god Prajāpati (lord of creatures) who picked the king from among gods. With regard to human kings, there are many textual references from the Vedic world (ca. from 1500 BCE to ca. 400 BCE) in its many religious texts such as the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, Śrautasūtras, and Upaniṣads, but those references may not be taken as actual historical facts. The Rgveda (RV), for example, mentions kings such as Tr̥tsu, (Bharata king) Sudās, and Trasadasyu; and it also narrates the battle of ten kings (RV VII.18), including the dynasties of the Purus and Kurus. In Vedic times, the king was referred to as *rājan* (king or chieftain), *saṃrāj* (supreme ruler) and *svarāj* (self-ruler).⁸ Jameson and Witzel argue that there was some kind of ritual selection or election of the king by the clan representatives or by the lesser kings; there was also a lineal descent of

kings of the major tribal confederation.⁹ The society was traditionally divided into four classes (*varṇa*), and by ca. 1000 BCE, this class division was religiously sanctioned and it was later firmly enforced. The rulers usually belonged to the warrior (*kṣatriya*) class (RV X.90), and they maintained reciprocal relationships with poets and priests who composed hymns, (such as those in the RV) and performed rituals (such as coronations) for them.

This article compares and contrasts the coronation rituals of the ancient Hebrew and Vedic kings.¹⁰ This study comes out of an intellectual curiosity because despite being two different religious traditions enunciating disparate worldviews, the rituals seemed to share similar conceptions and patterns; this article, therefore, explores what those common patterns are and what they mean about kingship and coronation in these traditions. Despite their differences within those common patterns, these ceremonies variously translate the Hebrew and Vedic Brāhmaṇic conceptions of the institution of kingship as divine (i.e., in our context, related to God or gods) and the king as sacred (i.e., related to reality, God/gods, or other supernal beings). While the Vedic traditions tend to conflate more easily the king's humanity with divinity, the Jewish tradition is careful to present the king as a human being, yet one more intimately connected to God because of his "chosen" status to carry out God's plan. Although it is very hard to pin down any direct or indirect influences of ancient Vedic or Jewish traditions on one another, these rituals are amenable to a comparative study in terms of ritual patterns, symbols, and their conceptions of the sacred king and of divine kingship (as an institution), and they shed light on how these traditions carried out their coronations in actual situations.

This study is based on ancient Hebrew Bible and the Vedic texts, possibly redacted by the turn of the Common Era. It lets the rituals directly speak to each other and uncover some similarities across differences. The Jewish tradition had a relatively much shorter period of kingship experience than that of "Hindus." Because of this scenario, the description and discussion of kingship and coronation in Hindu religious literature are naturally far more extensive than those in Jewish traditions. The Bible specifically names the kings and narrates the coronations of some kings, mostly of the southern kingdom. However, as Marc Zvi Brettler notes, it is also "unlikely that one set of rituals would have persisted throughout this entire period in both geographical centers."¹¹ The same principle applies to the Vedic texts as various kings inevitably followed their own religious traditions to carry out their coronations. Further, the rules for the performance of the coronation as mentioned in Vedic religious literature such as Śrautasūtras and Brāhmaṇas¹² may be regarded more as ideal prescriptions enunciating Brāhmaṇic ideas and less as actual historical facts for it is not certain whether these prescriptions were exactly followed in the performance of the rituals.

For this study, Mircea Eliade's ideas about the sacred, *hierophany* and the religious life of ancient people have been adopted. Eliade emphasizes the nature of religious experience as sacred and discusses the ways through which the divine power manifests itself. He distinguishes two separate modes of human existence as the sacred and the profane. The sacred mode of existence is oriented to the revelation of what is ultimately real, while the profane mode belongs to ordinary forms of nature and experiences. Eliade makes it clear that the religious people of ancient cultures oriented their life to the sacred by living a sanctified life that influenced their thoughts and practices; they participated in the primordial acts and their actions followed the directions and actions of God or gods.¹³ Eliade uses the term *hierophany* to "designate the act of manifestation of the sacred."¹⁴ According to him, when the-divine manifests itself through an object, the object is no longer just an object, but is itself the sacred; yet the object "continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu."¹⁵ Eliade's notion of the sacred can help us better understand the ancient coronations and Indo-Judaic traditions because, as it appears, these coronation rituals were oriented to transforming a human being into a sacred king and conferring the institution of kingship as divine and divinely ordained.

Divine Enthronement: The Coronation of God or gods

The Hebrew Bible mentions the enthronement of God in the universe, and this divine enthronement should be distinguished from the coronation of human kings. In the case of God's enthronement in the Bible, no human or other agents are involved; it is because God is primal and pervades the universe out of His own will and without the necessity of any other agents. God's actions are envisioned as different from any human creative activity, and He is presented as incomparable and ultimately incomprehensible.¹⁶ Psalms 2, 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, and 99, for example, celebrate "the kingship and enthronement of Yahweh (God)." Because of the significance of God's enthronement, these psalms were also "frequently associated with the proposed enthronement ceremonies of the human kings in the pre-exilic Temple in Jerusalem."¹⁷ Psalm 2, for example, is called the "coronation psalm" and it refers to God enthroned in heaven (2:4). Psalm 47 similarly reaffirms God's reign: "Great King over the whole earth" (2b, 7); "God has ruled over nations; God has sat upon his holy throne!" (47:8).¹⁸ Likewise, psalms 93 and 99 mention God's throne (v. 2), a noisy scene (vv. 3-4), and various divine laws (v. 5).¹⁹ Psalm 93 specifically mentions strength and majesty as God's robes: "Yahweh reigns! He has robed himself with majesty. Yahweh has robed Himself; belted Himself with strength! The world is firmly established; immovable" (93:1). Finally, psalm 99 gives some concrete details about God's throne, presenting Him as the "cherubim-enthroned-One" (80:2; 99:1) and His throne as "supported by the wings of cherubim," i.e., angels who symbolized the power and mobility of the enthroned king.²⁰ These psalms celebrate the enthronement of Yahweh as King. Since God is envisioned as ultimate Creator and eternally enthroned in heaven and controlling the operations of the universe, the Bible does not discuss God's coronation as the primal event but celebrates His enthronement.²¹

According to the ancient Hebrew understanding, God is transcendental, incomparable and inimitable, and cannot be projected in any concrete object or form. B. C. Ollenburger, therefore, regards God's enthronement as metaphoric and interprets it as God's "primordial victory over chaos... exercised from Zion in the autumn festival in Israelite worship."²² In ancient Hebrew tradition, God's coronation was celebrated on various religious occasions. The main festival observed in pre-exilic Israel was that of the Tabernacles, and these psalms may have served the purpose of glorifying God and His enthronement during the ancient festival. References to such acts as trumpet blowing (in psalm 47) were the basis for the utilization of the psalms on Rosh Hashanah, New Year's Day (the first day of Tishri)²³ and later in sabbath worship.²⁴ According to Hans Gottlieb, Yahweh's enthronement was not simply a primeval event but it is "experienced 'now' in the cultic drama of the New Year Festival."²⁵ These psalms were very valuable not only on the New Year festival, but also in other contexts. For example, they were most possibly recited during the (human) king's enthronements in ancient Israel.²⁶ On these occasions, the repeated refrain in these psalms that it was Yahweh who reigned must have reminded the Hebrew kings that it was actually God, not a human king, who reigned eternally, and that the human king served simply as a servant to implement God's covenant: "At the 'enthronement festival'—as we may primarily call it—ancient Israel witnessed Yahweh's arrival as king, when He literally founded His kingdom."²⁷

Unlike the Bible, the Vedic texts refer to the actual coronation of gods such as that of Indra (RV 4.19.2; TB 1.5.9.1; 2.2.7.2), Agni, Soma (TS 2.6.2.1; AB 1.14.5), Mitra, and Varuṇa (JB 3.152). The Vedic texts mention that human kings' coronations actually mimicked the divine coronation. The divine coronation was also celebrated in the rituals of crowning, decorating and consecration of the deities in the temple although this practice did not happen in the Vedic time, but it began only after the turn of the Common Era when deities were increasingly represented and installed in the form of the icons. Unlike in the Hebrew tradition, the purpose of the coronation of the Vedic gods was to invest in him the powers (from other gods) which the god (king) did not already have, while in the case of the Hebrew God, no such investiture is desired and even possible as God is all-powerful and beyond the reach of

other beings. The Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa (3.152), for example, mentions that Varuṇa was anointed by various gods unto sovereignty (*rājya-*), extended sovereignty (*vairājya-*), uncontrolled sovereignty (*svārājya-*), complete sovereignty (*sāmrajya-*), unimpaired power (*sārvavaśya-*) and supremacy (*pārameśthya-*).²⁸ Likewise, the Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa (8, 14, 4; 38-39) describes the great unction (*mahābhiṣeka-*) of Indra: "anointed with this great anointment Indra won all victories, obtained all worlds, attained the superiority (*śraīṣṭhyam*), pre-eminence (*atiṣṭhām*), supremacy (*paramatām*) over all the gods."²⁹ Another section of this text (AB 8, 12) refers to the unction of Indra by god Prajāpati and by other classes of divinities.³⁰ The Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa (JB 2.197) and Śāṅkhśrautasūtra (15.12.1) relate that this ritual was performed for Varuṇa to attain pre-eminence, sovereignty, and supremacy over all realms. Despite differences between Hebrew and Vedic conceptions, kingship in both traditions seems to have arisen out of a military necessity for leadership.³¹ In the Vedic tradition, this need is expressed in the context of the continuous battle between the gods and the demons and the election of a god-king to defeat the demons (AB 1:14), while in the Hebrew tradition the selection is done through the prophet to unite the ancient Jewish people against the invading forces.

II. The Coronation Rituals in Ancient Hebrew and Vedic Traditions

The Bible celebrates God's enthronement in the universe, but not His coronation. The Hebrew tradition understood God's enthronement as a primal, natural and continuing event, and it did not involve the participation of other agents that would be the case in coronation. From the Hebrew perspective, God did not require that the coronation be performed by humans to make Him God-king, only that humans obey the laws of God and celebrate His ultimate power. However, the Hebrew kings' coronation included a series of ritual acts (with the assistance of other humans and direction of God), such as proclamation, anointing and enthronement (see Appendix for the list of coronation rituals). Enthronement is, therefore, one out of many other coronation rituals. The Bible mentions the coronation of at least six different kings – Saul, David, Adonijah, Solomon, Joash, Jehoahaz, and Mattania. Many of the rituals appear similar, but because of the sketchy details in the Bible, it seems that not every king's coronation followed the same ritual sequence. Further, the Bible provides very little detail about the particular rituals, adding to the complexity of the study, and it is difficult to say why the description of some kings' coronation is more extensive than that of others. The vague details of the kings' coronation in the Bible possibly had to do with people's abiding belief in the kingdom of God and not of humans.

In the Vedic traditions, the coronation of the human king is referred to in the Rigveda (ca. 1200 BCE), the most ancient religious text available from India. It is also assumed that one Rigvedic hymn (IV. 42) was spoken by King Trasadasyu at his coronation.³² This shows that the coronation already seems to have been a very popular practice in India, going back at least to ca. 1200 BCE. By the middle Vedic period (after ca. 1000 BCE), a solemn coronation called the *rājasūya* (literally, bringing forth the king) was developed,³³ and the Vedic texts plentifully detail the Vedic coronation of *rājasūya*, which consisted, as in Hebrew kings' coronation, of such culminating ritual events as the proclamation, the unction (consecration), and the enthronement.³⁴

Unlike in ancient Hebrew tradition that is careful not to conflate the divine with the human, a king's coronation in Vedic India was understood as a faithful repetition of the coronation of gods such as Indra, Soma, Mitra, Varuṇa, and Viṣṇu.³⁵ The Vedic texts are clear that the religious observances on Earth should follow the actions of gods: "We must do what the gods did in the beginning" (ŚB, VII, 2, 1, 4) and "thus the gods did; thus men do" (TB, I, 5, 9, 4). In Eliade's terms, the coronation rituals, by re-enacting the actions of God (or gods), allowed opportunities for the ritual participants to remain "in the sacred, hence in reality" while sanctifying the world around them. According to Eliade, such rituals helped the ancient

people transcend the worldly (profane, in Eliade's word) time; this was done in order to continuously regenerate their life and that of the world around them.³⁶ However, this does not quite apply in the Hebrew tradition as the coronation of the Hebrew kings does not directly imitate God's enthronement although the terms and ritual events of the coronation echo the divine and human enthronements.

In the following, an attempt is made to compare and contrast the main coronation rituals. It illustrates how despite differences in religious worldviews, these two ancient traditions seemed to share similar conceptions and practices with regard to the coronation of the kings.³⁷ This comparison is also sensitive to and acknowledges the differences within and across these traditions.

i. Divine Choice and the Sacredness of the King

In ancient Hebrew tradition, the human kingship was accomplished by divine choice. According to biblical narratives (1 Kings 2: 15; 1 Chronicles 28: 5), God is invisible at all times but He revealed His choice through the prophets. Since it was God's choice, He could choose any suitable person from any family; the king (being chosen) would, therefore, not necessarily be the oldest brother who generally would have traditionally qualified to be a king, as per the practice of primogeniture. For example, Saul was the youngest brother, not the eldest; he was also from the smallest tribe, Benjamin, rather than from the largest one (1 Samuel 9:21). But it was Saul who was chosen by God to be the king and to protect the community of the faithful. In another context, King David explains this process of divine selection and presents God as directly communicating with him (1 Chronicles 28: 4-7):

God of Israel chose me [David] from all my father's family to be king over Israel forever. For He chose Judah to be the ruler of the House of Judah. [He chose] my father's house, and of the sons of my father it was me that He saw fit to make king over all Israel. And from all my sons—for many sons has God given me—He has chosen Solomon, my son, to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of God, over Israel. He said to me, "Your son Solomon—he shall build my Temple and my courtyards; for I have chosen him to be a son for Me, and I will be a Father of him. And I will establish his kingdom forever—if he will be firm in fulfilling my commandments and my laws, as on this day."

It is important to note that the passage repeatedly uses the word "chose" to emphasize that the king and kingship were commanded by God and not of human making. This also applies to the succession of kings, in which the choice of a successor was attributed to God Himself.

In its own way, the Vedic tradition also developed this notion of the divine origin of human kingship, which is implied in the Rigveda (4.42.9) itself³⁸ where King Trasadasyu is called a "demi-god." In the Rigvedic hymn, this king is said to have been granted to the people by the (Rigvedic) gods Indra and Varuṇa, and this hymn shows how the kingship was a divine institution from early on.³⁹ The king also seems to have been elected, at least theoretically, by a body of people,⁴⁰ although it is difficult to say whether the Vedic kings were actually elected or whether their status was just confirmed by some kind of royal assembly. Regardless, as in Hebrew traditions, the king was a military leader⁴¹ and was charged with such duties as protecting the people.⁴²

According to the Vedic mythology, Prthu is regarded as "the first of men who was installed as a king" (AV 8: 10.24; ŚB 5.3.5.4).⁴³ His coronation is said to have been directly performed by gods such as Viṣṇu and Indra; Viṣṇu himself is said to have entered his body and approved his kingship. It is thus enjoined that the king's coronation be performed in accordance with how it was done for the gods and for the first king (AB, 7.20.5; 8.12; 8.14.4): "The king is anointed with waters by which Indra, Soma, Varuṇa, Yama, and the first

man Manu were anointed, with the brilliance of Agni, the radiance of the sun, the power of Indra."⁴⁴

As we saw in the instances above, both Hebrew and Vedic traditions are unanimous about the "divine" institution of kingship and the "chosen" status of the king. However, the Bible refers to God as directly acting in the course of human events and participating in the selection of each king and his successor. In contrast, in Vedic traditions, one or the other god is attributed to the selection of the "first" king, but this does not seem to be the case in the selection of the many other successive kings, as the kingship often automatically transferred to the first son of the reigning king or to the one chosen by him and his assembly. The Vedic narratives recount how gods themselves participated in the consecration of the first human king, and this sacred scenario is only replicated in other kings' coronations in which the gods and other divinities are invited by the priests to invest their powers to the new king being consecrated. This means that the gods and other supernatural beings were not directly present in the coronation, but they supposedly invisibly participated in the coronation and authorized the new king to rule over the people. In the Vedic texts, there are many examples about the "godly" status of the human kings; this status is either claimed by the Vedic king himself or he is presented by others (especially, the priests composing those texts) as godly or god in human form. This is in sharp contrast to the Hebrew texts that often talk about the "chosen," but not the godly (or god-like), status of the human king.

Yet, because of the king's special status of "chosen-ness"—which is either direct (Hebrew) or often indirect (Vedic, through the lineal descent of the king but the status is confirmed through the rituals), both Hebrew and Vedic traditions present the king as a sacred person.⁴⁵ In the Hebrew case, the sacred status is on account of God's direct choice and continued guidance. Because of this situation, the king was believed to embody some divine power and charisma, and was elevated higher than other humans. Yet, his sacredness was not overly glorified in the Bible and was instead circumscribed within certain limits. In contrast, in Vedic tradition, the god-like status of the king was very much sought and was not considered blasphemous as it was the case with monotheistic ancient Hebrews. The ŚB, for example, states that because of his god-like standing, "the king may not stand on the earth with bare feet" (ŚB 5.5.3.7; Kāthaka-Saṃhītā 15.8.29). Gonda interprets this as "intended to prevent his [king's] mystic power or special virtue from 'flowing away.'"⁴⁶ The text also mandates that the king "might not shave his head for a year after his inauguration (coronation)" (ŚB 5.5.3.1) in order to maintain the sacredness and divine power bestowed upon him at his coronation. According to Gonda, "the rite has put the strength of the water with which he (the king) is consecrated into the hair, and if he had the hair cut off, he would destroy the virtue thus engendered and impair the prosperity (*śrī*) conferred upon himself. So he may shorten it, but not cut it off."⁴⁷ There are other similar prescriptions for the king which help him maintain his sanctified status and separate him from other people of his kingdom.

While the Bible does not offer plentiful detail about kings' sacredness because of the possible objection to this kind of representation as idolatrous, it is just the reverse in the case of the Vedic kings. The Manusmṛti (5.93), Vasiṣṭha-dharmaśāstra (19.48) and Viṣṇu-dharma-sūtra (22.47), for example, mention that kings are not liable to impurity (*āśauca*-) because they occupy the position of the god Indra; these authorities affirm that "purity and impurity are caused and removed by the great gods and the guardian deities (*lokapālas*) by whose essence the king is pervaded." It is also attested that the ruler once enthroned is immediately purified, because "he performs his royal duties of protecting the people and administering justice."⁴⁸ The consecrated king is also "put on a par with such people as a *brahmacārin* (an unmarried brāhmin practicing chastity), a consecrated sacrificer, and other persons filled with holiness or supernormal power."⁴⁹ The Gautama-dharmaśāstra (14.45) mentions that the monarch is always pure while performing his duties.⁵⁰ Manu (5, 93) is similarly forceful about the king's inherent purity: "The detrimental effect of impurity does not fall on kings, nor on those engaged in the performance of a vow or of a great sacrifice (*sattra*-), for the first are

seated on the throne of Indra, and the last two are ever pure like brahman (brāhmin).” Finally, the Nārada-dharmaśāstra (18.8) compares the king with the fire to declare the king’s purity: “As fire is not polluted even though it always burns the creatures of the world (*prajāś*), even so a king is not polluted by inflicting punishment on those who deserve it.”

It is not simply by virtue of the king’s connection with divinity that he was considered sacred. Both Hebrew and the Vedic writings, in fact, equally emphasize that the king should also embody actual virtues in thought, speech and deed, which can only enable him to command a higher sacred status. The ŚB, for example, mentions that the king “should speak and do only what is right” (ŚB 5.4.4.5). In the RV (RV 10.109.6; AV 5.17.10), the word used for “reality and truth” is *satya*, and it is said that the kings who keep their word (i.e., speak truth and act accordingly) can have immense spiritual powers.⁵¹ The religious texts are unanimous in asking the king to always uphold the *rājadharmā*, i.e., the dharma (duties) of the king and kingship: “By upholding the dharma, the ruler becomes a sustainer of the realm (*rāṣṭrabhṛt*)” (ŚB 9.4.1.1). According to the AB (8.17.6), the king when consecrated and dharma-embodied becomes, in fact, “a lord of all beings.” Religious texts are unanimous that the king should embody such qualities and qualifications: of a noble family; godly, spirited, virtuous, truthful, unflinching in promises, and grateful; broad-minded; prompt; powerful enough to control his feudatories; firm in mind; of good fortune; having a council of ministers of no mean caliber; and desirous of self-discipline.⁵² Kane enumerates other qualities for the king as mentioned in different *dharma* texts (related to customs, duties, laws and so on), including the ones such as: the ability to protect and impart justice, righteousness, (ritual) purity, truthfulness, compassion, impartiality, restraint of the senses, and valor.⁵³ In the Vedic texts, the *rājadharmā* was more important than the king’s temporal authority and it influenced how the king should rule as per the religious codes. The Bible similarly enumerates such qualities for the king, including a long life (everlasting dynasty), wisdom, wealth, strength, majesty, physical beauty, and an ability to be just and impartial; the king also had to act following the command of God and protect the people.⁵⁴ In addition, the Israelite king, at least in Deuteronomy’s version, must have a Torah scroll with him at all times. This is not just a ritual necessity but the requirement that the kings always abide by the divine laws as given in the Bible; this is also comparable to the *rājadharmā* (the laws and duties of the king) which the king should immaculately follow in the Vedic traditions. The commands of God through the prophets and priests are emphasized in the Bible, while the Vedic traditions focus on the *rājadharmā* as detailed in various sacred texts.

ii. Question of Secrecy and Mystery

The king’s sacredness is something mystical and invisible. The religious texts give the impression that God’s (or gods’) ways are mysterious, and his choice is revealed secretly only through the chosen people, often either prophets, or priests, or kings. In the Bible, for example, God announces in the prophet Samuel’s ear that He will be sending Saul from another land to be anointed and to take care of the people: “At this time tomorrow I will send a man to you from the land of Benjamin; you shall anoint him to be ruler over My people Israel, and he will save My people from the hand of the Philistines—for I have seen [the distress] of My people, since its cry has come before Me” (1 Samuel 9:16). In the narrative, Saul is “set aside” and elevated; he is asked to participate in the special meal with the prophet (1 Samuel 9:24). On the actual day of his selection as king, Samuel invites all the children of Israel; he then singles out the tribe of Benjamin, then the Matrite family, and then Saul as the first human king of Israel (1 Samuel 10: 17-24). Saul’s path to kingship is also accompanied by divine signs, and he is even enabled to make prophecies (1 Samuel 10:11).

All such events explain the mystery of the selection process, and this is comparable with the Vedic mythological narrative of how the first (human) king Prthu— and in some accounts Manu— was selected by gods to rule the people. However, the gods do not seem to directly participate in every king’s selection and coronation, although coronation and other

rituals invoke diverse kinds of divinities and other supernatural beings to invest the king with divine power and authority. The coronation of the kings as narrated in the Brāhmaṇas (AB. 38-39; TB. II.7.15-17; SB. III.5) was a solemn (*śrauta*, i.e., related to the Vedas) ritual and it was carried out by the priests and other participants in public, although some of the central rituals may have been performed secretly by the priests involved. Unlike in Hebrew traditions, various classes of society (for example, *brāhmin*, *ksatriya*, and *vaiśya*) were represented, and all had roles to select, even if nominally, and invest the king with authority and power.

iii. Sacred Place and Time

In Hebrew tradition, once chosen, the king would be sanctified in a place such as the Temple because it was an earthly habitation of God and because the place was chosen by God Himself. The place was naturally sacred because, as Eliade notes, it was "what it is because of the permanent nature of the *hierophany* that first consecrated it."⁵⁵ For the king, this was a transformative moment, a shift to the sacred world where he would be directly connected to God. Even if it was not an actual physical sanctuary, it was nonetheless the place where God manifested for a certain purpose (1 Samuel 10:24). Solomon's coronation, for example, was performed at Gihon, which was popular for the sanctuary of the Ark. This place may also have a water spring which was very important for ablution and other purposes: "He drinks of the brook by the wayside" (Psalm 110:7).⁵⁶ The Bible also refers to the tent at Gihon (1 Kings 2: 28) which was installed by David for the Ark (2 Samuel 6: 17) and in which (i.e., in "the tent of Yahweh") Joab and Adonias had sought refuge (1 Kings 2: 28; 1 Kings 2: 28 and 1 Kings 1:9). As seen in the coronation of Joash, a special place was set aside for the king in the Temple for this purpose (2 Kings 11: 4-14; 2 Chronicles 23:3-12): "Then he saw the king standing by the pillar, as was the rule, and the singers and the trumpeters playing for the king while all the people of the land were rejoicing and blowing trumpets" (2 Kings 11:14). The Temple in ancient Hebrew tradition had a high pedigree and its construction followed a celestial prototype. In King David's words to Solomon: "All this...the Lord made me understand in writing by His Hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern" (1 Chronicles 28:19).⁵⁷ This suggested that the coronation occurred *in illo tempore*, "in that time"—the primordial, timeless realm. The occasions on which God manifested Himself in choosing or sanctifying the king were very powerful, and all such ritual moments were *hierophanic*, that is, "the time in which a ritual takes place": "mythical time.... the rhythms of the cosmos as revelations."⁵⁸

This is not quite different from what we see in the Vedic kings' coronations, which seem to have mostly been done in the palace precinct itself. The Vedic people of ancient times had not yet developed the practice of worshiping gods and goddesses in the forms of icons (images or idols) in the temples; instead, they constructed temporary altars for fire rituals (*yajña* and *homa*) in which they invoked diverse types of deities and supernatural powers by reciting the Vedic mantras and by offering grains and other eatables into the fire: "One says that one is installed when one has built a fire altar and all those who build the fire altar are legally established" (ŚB, VII, 1,1,1-4). This was one of the ways through which they consecrated space and maintained connections with the cosmos: "For, in fact, the erection of an altar to Agni is nothing but the reproduction — on the microcosmic scale — of the Creation."⁵⁹ Through such ritual repetition of cosmogony, the participants, both in Hebrew and Vedic traditions, symbolically transformed the space into a cosmos, and communicated and aligned themselves with the cosmic forces: "Each Brāhmaṇic sacrifice marks a new Creation of the world.... If the raising of the altar imitates the cosmogonic act, the sacrifice proper has another end: to restore the primordial unity, that which existed before the Creation" (cf. ŚB, VI, 5, 1).⁶⁰

The place was the *axis mundi* — a meeting place of gods, humans and the cosmos. This space was inseparably connected to sacred time, which in fact included all times. This is explained in the ŚB, "the fire altar is the year as the 360 bricks of the enclosure correspond to the 360 nights of the year, and the 360 *yajusmati* bricks to the 360 days" (ŚB, X, 5,4,10).

The space is similarly connected to directionality, as directions are further linked to and represented by different deities and powerful beings. In Vedic traditions, the coronation was performed at an auspicious time when the constellation of stars was aligned in certain ways, and this was done in order to generate all kinds of blessings and divine powers for the king and the nation. The coronation rituals were performed on the northeast side of the palace (BGŚS I.23) and the king faced east (while being enthroned) — both directions symbolizing auspiciousness and victory in Vedic texts and traditions.

Unlike in Vedic India, the timing of the actual coronation (or simply an anointment) in Hebrew tradition was a divine decision, and in fact, any time chosen by God was sacred and auspicious. In contrast, the Vedic tradition paid attention to many other things, and rituals were largely the preserve of the priests who in consultation with the palace astrologers decided the time of the rituals. The *Sāmavidhāna Brāhmaṇa* (SVB III.5), for example, mentions that the priest “should crown the king when the moon is in the *Puṣya* or *Śravaṇa* constellation.”⁶¹ The *Baudhāyana-gr̥hya-śeṣasūtra* (BGŚS I.23) similarly recommends that the ritual be performed on the fifth or the thirteenth lunar day (*tithi*) of the bright half when the moon is in *Puṣya* or *Śravaṇa*, or in any other auspicious constellation, although some other texts such as the *Vishnudharmottara Purāṇa* (II.18.2-4) mention that there is no waiting for an auspicious time on the death of the reigning king.

iv. Bathing

The bathing does not seem to be a central ritual occasion in Hebrew Coronation. However, the reference to the spring at Gihon might suggest that the coronation may have included some kind of ritual ablution of the king. The Bible refers to immersion in water by the tent, dressing in a sacred vestment, anointing, and sanctifying: “You [Moses] shall bring Aaron and his sons near to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and immerse them in water. You shall dress Aaron in the sacred vestments and anoint him; you shall sanctify him and he shall minister to me” (Exodus 40:12-13). However, the anointing of Prophets and coronation of kings were two different callings, and the coronation may or may not have involved the actual bathing as part of the ritual. Yet, Geo Widengren assumes that “certain water-purifications had a place in the Israelite royal consecration.”⁶² Ricks and Sroka similarly think that the ceremonial washing of the king was part of the ritual: “When the High Priest raised Solomon to the kingship, he anointed him after washing him in the waters of Gihon.”⁶³ In Hebrew traditions, the bathing ritual was performed to “avert evil, give life and strength, and symbolize rebirth,”⁶⁴ and any bathing that was part of the coronation may have suggested similar meanings.

Bathing and unction are far more extensive in Vedic rituals than in the Hebrew tradition. The meanings attached to these rituals appear to be similar, although the role of purification was much more emphasized in Vedic rituals. The *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* (GB), for example, specifies that the king should be bathed with the waters contained in 16 jars (pitchers)—with four jars each, made of gold, silver, copper and clay—by the very holy and learned *brāhmins* (*śrotṛiyas*). Waters are collected from a deep reservoir or a lake and placed in the jars, and all kinds of husked and unhusked grains and liquids are then mixed. All such processes involved the recitation of formulaic expressions (mantras) from the Vedic texts. After this, the king is bathed (and consecrated) with mantras such as (AV 4.22.1): “O Indra, make this my *kṣatriya* prosper.” The rituals in the *Sāmavidhāna Brāhmaṇa* (SVB III.5) are more detailed than in the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa*. In the SVB, waters are brought in the jars from holy rivers (such as the Ganges) and the sea, and placed in the jars, along with the rice, barley, sesame and black beans, curds, honey, flowers and gold. While being seated on the auspicious throne made of *udumbara* (*Ficus Glomerata*) wood, the king is bathed from horn-pipes cut off from the horns of living cows, while mantras are chanted. The *Purāṇic* texts (such as the *Agni Purāṇa*, 218 and *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*), however, enjoin an additional bathing

with different types of clay (earth), a bathing meant for the total purification of the king and for making him worthy of assuming the divine throne.

v. Anointing

In the Hebrew tradition, the ceremonial bathing led to the actual anointing as an important culminating moment of the rituals. It was done with the holy olive oil kept in the Temple, and the ritual of anointing made the king "Yahweh's anointed." The Bible records the anointing ceremonies of Saul (1 Samuel 10:1), David (2 Samuel 5:3), Solomon (1 Kings 1: 34, 39), Jehu (2 Kings 9:6), Joash (2 Kings 11:12), Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:30), and Absalom (2 Samuel 19:10). It narrates that the prophet Samuel anointed Saul (1 Samuel 10: 1) and David (1 Samuel 16: 13), the prophet Zaddok anointed Solomon (1 Kings 1: 39) and Joas (2 Kings 11: 12) with the horn of oil taken from the sacred tent, and the disciple of Eliseus anointed Jehu.⁶⁵ The ritual often involved the priest or the prophet taking a flask of oil and pouring it on the king's head and proclaiming that God anointed him as the king: "Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured some onto [Saul's] head, and he kissed him. He said, 'Indeed, God has anointed you as ruler over His heritage'" (1 Samuel 10:1).

The anointing was a religious ritual that endowed the king with the power of God (1 Samuel 16:13). With this ritual, the king was called a *mashiah*, the anointed savior responsible to God and his people. He was consequently spiritually elevated, and his rule was made indisputable unless the divine blessing was withdrawn from him (by God) or, at his behest, by a prophet. Instances in the Bible suggest that the king was a sacred person and in fact inviolable; David, for example, could not challenge Saul because of the latter's anointed status (1 Samuel 24: 7, 11; 26: 9, 11, 23). On another occasion, God punished a man who attempted to harm Saul (2 Samuel 1: 14, 16). These examples suggest the elevated sacred status of the king whom no human but God could challenge.

In the Bible, two types of Israelites anointing have been noted: (1) anointing by God through a prophet or priest (1 Samuel 9: 16 and 10: 1; 16:13)⁶⁶; and (2) anointing by the people, for example, in the coronation of David by Judah (2 Samuel 2:4) and anointing by Israel (2 Samuel 2, 5). The first category may be further divided into private (e.g., David in 1 Samuel 16; Saul in 1 Samuel 10:1; and Jehu in 2 Kings 9) and public unction. Even in the case of anointing by the people, it was understood that the choice was distinctly that of God, and the people's authority was arguably very minimal as they just had to show their acceptance of the new king sent to them by God. There are also examples of future kings being secretly anointed, first as a prince and then as a king (9:16, 10:1),⁶⁷ and it shows how the Hebrew kingship was so much tied to God and what kind of authoritarian power the prophets upheld.

Despite the similarity in significance, the Vedic anointing is far more extensive, comprising lots of ritual ingredients and elements and not limited to the application of the holy oil as in the Hebrew tradition. In the coronation of the *rājasūya*, both the priests and the people participated. The Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa (II.7.15-17), for example, recommends that the king be sprinkled with "holy water in which sprouts of barley and *dūrvā* (panic) grass are mixed up"⁶⁸ while being seated on the chair of the udumbara wood. His arms and head are then anointed with milk blended with clarified butter.⁶⁹ The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa mentions eight ingredients (curd, honey, melted butter, rain water collected during sunshine, rice sprout, barley sprout, crude beer and *dūrvā* grass), plus the green shoots of eight kinds of trees and plants (*nyagrodha*, *udumbara*, *aśvattha*, *plakṣa*, rice with barley sprout, large rice with young blades, panic seeds, and barley). These ingredients are poured into the unction waters in a goblet made of udumbara wood, and the king is sprinkled through a golden strainer (AB 8.17-18). The ŚB, however, gives a long list of 17 types of waters and sacred liquids such as waters from the Sarasvati river, eastward streaming water, upstream flowing water, rainwater from when the sun is shining, and the embryonic water of the calving cow; and milk, curds, ghee, and honey. In the consecration of the king with these liquids, the representatives of the first

three classes of society (Brahmin, *rājanya* and *Vaiśya*, but apparently no women or representative from the traditionally *śūdra* class) participated.⁷⁰ The BGŚS (I.23), however, recommends a simple ritual in which the priest takes the golden jars and sprinkles the king with water falling upon him from the cone-like horns of cows.

It is understood that this ritual causes the rebirth of the king and is therefore called *Varuṇasava*, suggesting that in this instance, the king impersonates the god *Varuṇa* and that he is reborn from the waters and other sacred liquids, which are the domains of *Varuṇa*: "It is *Varuṇa* whom they anoint" (Śāṅkha, 15.13.4).⁷¹ Similarly, the numbers 16 or 17 are connected with the god *Prajāpati*, the primordial god representing the totality of the universe, and the king is said to be made into this highest god: "Now 16 kinds of water are those he offers upon; and he offers 16 oblations: that makes 32. On two of them he does not offer, viz. on the water from the *Sarasvati* and on the sun-motes: that makes 34. For three and 30 are the gods, and *Prajāpati* is the 34th: he thus makes him to be *Prajāpati* (the lord of creatures)" (ŚB, 5.3.4.23). The actual sprinklings are done with the mantra recitations; the king sits on the *udumbara* throne, and is sprinkled with those sacred waters and liquids from four directions--by a *brāhmin* priest (east), a king (*rājanya*) or another *brāhmin* priest (south), a representative from the merchant (*vaiśya*) class (west), and an allied relative (north), from four different types of wooden vessels (i.e., those made of *nyagrodha*, *palāśa*, *aśvattha*, and *udumbara* trees). They collectively purify him and invest in him all the powers of the deities invoked and those of the people with such Vedic mantras (VS 1.31) as: "You are brilliance, you are white-shining, you are immortal, your name is 'firm place'...; on the instigation of god *Savitar*, with the arms of the *Aśvin*, with the hands of *Pūṣan*, I sprinkle you for strength, good luck and fame, with *Agni*'s glow, with the brilliance of the sun (*Surya*), with *Indra*'s virility."

The libation symbolically embodied the power of the divinities and, when empowered by the *rājasūya* mantra (VS 10.17-18), it represented what Witzel calls "a new birth of the king out of the wombs of heaven and earth" because of the connection of the *abhiṣeka* (consecration by sprinkling sacred waters and other liquids on the king's head and other parts of his body) with the heavenly, intermediate and earthly waters.⁷² Heesterman interprets this ritual as the king's new birth out of the womb of the year (as the *rājasūya* coronation takes the entire year to accomplish) and out of the cosmos, the new-born king being the pillar.⁷³ The king also takes three *Viṣṇu* steps during his coronation, and this further identifies him with the god *Vishnu* with his role as the preserver of the nation.

According to the Yajurvedic texts (e.g., *BaudhŚS*, *MānŚS*, *VārŚS*, *ĀpŚS*, *HirŚS*, and *KātyŚS*), the king is sprinkled while he is standing or sitting on a tiger skin, with his face turned toward the east and with his arms raised; a perforated gold plate is placed on the king's head, through which the consecration is done. The ritual also includes rubbing the consecration liquids on the body of the king with an antelope horn.⁷⁴ Symbolically, these acts are considered very potent and auspicious, and they are elaborated in the ŚB in such terms: "And why he [priest] anoints him [king] (standing) with upstretched arms; those arms in truth are the king's power, and power also is that collected essence of the waters wherewith he now anoints him" (SVB 5.4.1.17). Tsuchiyama notes that in the *rājasūya*, the consecration is an independent ritual, and the unction fluids are used solely for sprinkling (unlike in the *Agnicayana* ritual).⁷⁵ In addition, the (fire rituals of) oblations (called *ratna-haviṃsī*) are offered in the houses of twelve principal persons (*ratnin*, jewels) of the court. There are also simulated victory march and game of dice, which display the power and wealth of the king. In this solemn (*śrauta*) ritual, the king is identified with various Vedic deities, such as *Savitr*, *Varuṇa* and *Indra*, and the mantras employed during the consecration (*abhiṣeka*) are meant to capture the essential qualities and energies of the deities. There is, however, a distinct difference in the *rājasūya* consecration of the Yajurveda and Rigveda: the consecration of the Rigveda (as given in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*) has the king seated on the throne (*āsandī*) and covered with a tiger skin; while in the Yajurveda the king "stands or sits on the tiger skin in

the sprinkling act and does not take a seat till the conclusion of the chariot drive."⁷⁶ In the *Rigveda* (in this context, Aitareya Brāhmaṇa), a diversity of plants are put into the sprinkling fluids, while in the *Yajurveda* it is the products of the cow (butter, milk, curd) that are put on the sprinkling waters.⁷⁷ In the *Atharvaveda* tradition, the unction water is prepared from the great rivers and the king sits or stands on the *dūrvā* grass.⁷⁸ While the *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* (i.e., belonging to the *Atharvaveda*) recommends using sixteen *bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*) fruits and sixteen jars (pitchers), along with clays from different places, the ŚB (i.e., belonging to the *Yajurveda*) recommends seventeen such items.

vi. Spiritual Transformation

With anointing, the king was said to undergo an actual transformation and was spiritually reborn: "You [Saul] will be transformed into another person" (1 Samuel 10: 10:6); "God transformed him [Saul] with a new heart" (1 Samuel 10: 9). He is invested with the power of God, and now his sacredness was something tangible: "Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him [David] in the midst of his brothers, and the spirit of God passed over David from that day on" (1 Samuel 16:13). The Bible describes the spirit (*ru'ah*) of God as His support (1 Sam. 16: 13-14; 18-20), strength (Psalm 89:21-25) and wisdom (Isaiah 11:1-4). It appears have been more direct and impactful in the case of David (1 Samuel 16:13) than in Saul (1 S 10: 10), although both are regarded as God's anointed.⁷⁹

The anointing was followed by the ritual activities such as the proclamation that the anointed "has become king" with the expressed wish that the new king might have a long life (reign). This was accompanied by the rituals of peace offerings and burnt offerings. De Vaux believes that since several Israelite kings had two names—a birth name and a regal name—it was also likely, though not certain, that "the kings of Judah received a new name (as symbolic of their rebirth) when they succeeded to the throne."⁸⁰

In Vedic ritual, we find a large number of elements for the investiture of different powers to the king. Very many different powers of the deities, mantras and contents of the consecration (such as cow products) are invested in the king, transforming him from an ordinary mortal to a sacred and powerful being. The *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* explains that, with such acts, the king "acquires great glory, enjoys the earth and always vanquishes his foes."⁸¹ The SB (V.3.5.20) mentions that the king is invested by the officiating priest with a garment (called *tārpya*), and causes the king to be reborn, "Thou art the inner caul of sovereignty." He [priest] thus causes him [king] to be born out of what is the inner caul of dominion. He then throws over him the mantle with 'Thou art the womb of sovereignty.' He thus causes him to be born." The ŚB (V, 5, 3, 6-7) describes how, as a sequel to his consecration, the king cuts his hair. From that time on, it becomes for him "a religious observance; as long as he lives he does not stand on this (earth with bare feet). From the throne-seat he slips into the shoes; and on shoes (he stands), whatever his vehicle may be." In the same vein, the AB (38) states that through the great coronation of Indra (*aindra mahābhiṣeka*), the kings' status is changed: "The kings of the Sātvatas in the south were called 'bhoja' (the king of uncommon qualities, and of the country and people called the Bhojas) after the coronation, the kings of the eastern countries were called 'samrāt' (one who rules over other princes and has performed the *rājasūya* sacrifice), the kings in the west were called 'svarāt' (self-ruler), and the kings of the north, i.e., of countries beyond the Himalayala (viz. Uttarakurus and Uttaramadras) were called 'virāt' (illustrious sovereign ruling far and wide)"⁸²

vii. Royal Insignia and Testimony

In Hebrew tradition, the king was endowed with royal insignia, such as a diadem or a crown (*nezer*) and a testimony (*edūth*) (2 Kings 11:12). The insignia appear to have been transferred to the next king when the kingship passed from one to the other (e.g., from Saul to David): "I then took the crown that was on his head and a bracelet that was on his arm