

### **“Taking Turns: Monarchy and “State” in the Ancient World**

The use of “state” in ancient Near Eastern studies may be more a concession to historiographic convention than an illuminating way to designate a distinctive historical reality. It is difficult to separate “state” from the concept of an institution whose structure and stability transcend the erratic changeability that typifies the ancient kin-based monarchic proprietary (i.e. the right to monopolize the use of force, redistribute land, sanction judicial procedure, decide the targets and timing of wars, and pass on the monarchic proprietary to an heir<sup>1</sup>). Such a “state” as “what persists when the regime changes” probably did not exist in the biblical world.

“Monarchy” would probably suffice as a designation for rule—and for translating forms of the root *mlk* in its Hebrew meaning. It is equally doubtful whether true republics ever came into being or, if they did, lasted for any length of time in the ancient Near East or Levant. Cf. Dawood, ed. *Ibn Khaldun: The Muqaddimah* (1967), xi: “To Ibn Khaldun ‘dynasty’ and ‘state’ signify one and the same thing—the word he uses for both is *dawlah*.”

A state exists only in so far as it is held together by the dynasty; when the dynasty disappears the state collapses.” The verb *dāla* means “to change periodically, take turns, alternate, rotate”; thus *dawlā* means “alternation, rotation, turn, change,” hence “dynasty” (and in modern Arabic “state, country, empire”). Cf. Hebrew *sbb* in 1 Kgs 2:15. For Ibn Khaldun (fourteenth century CE) the “state” is what *changes* with a change of dynasties, not what persists. Cf. Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (1988), 35-36: “Common political use of *dawla* dates from the accession to power of the ‘Abbasid caliphs in the mid-eighth century. The Umayyads had had their turn, and now it was the turn of the House of ‘Abbās.... The turn of the ‘Abbasids lasted a long time, and the word *dawla*, by a process of gradual transformation, came to mean the reigning ‘Abbasid house, and then, more generally, the dynasty and ultimately the state.”

In all probability, Ibn Khaldun’s classic understanding and the usage behind it apply to the ancient world as well. It clearly lies behind the use of Sumerian *bala*, “spindle,” and its Akkadian reflex *palû* to refer to a dynasty or regime. In the history of political Israel, the most significant discrepancy with this notion was the persistence of Samaria through five regime changes.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is that Jehu, the usurper of the Omrids, did not capture or build his own city. Did Jehu expect to replace the Davidids in Jerusalem as well and think to restore the rule of Jerusalem (whose independence was probably suppressed under the third-generation Omrids) in place of Samaria? The persistence of Samaria probably reflects Assyria’s growing influence in Palestine and Assyria’s identification of the later Israelite regimes as *bît humri*—the house of Omri—until the fall of Samaria well over a century after the end of the Omrids.

- Dr. Robert Coote

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<sup>1</sup> Normally the right to sanction judicial procedure included the privilege of revealing divine law; this the Israelite monarchies apparently were constrained to forgo. The separation of revealed law and judicial regime resulted in an extremely important feature of the house of David’s Scriptural canon—the distinction of Torah and Prophets—and ultimately underlay the development of the Jewish and Christian faiths untied to a specified regime.