

Legitimacy of Kingship in Biblical Narrative and Chinese Classic *Shu*: A Comparative Study



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The comparative study I conducted at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research during my tenure as a Noble Group Fellow focused on the legitimacy of kingship in the Hebrew Bible and in a Chinese classic *Shu* (Book of Historical Documents). By comparing and contrasting these two different kinds of legitimacy of kingship, my aim was to reach a better understanding of the monarchical traditions in East and West. The major thesis of this study argues that the Biblical tradition builds the legitimacy of kingship on a tripartite covenant between God, king and the people; therefore, the power of the monarchy is checked and balanced by the other participants of the covenant. In contrast, kingship in Chinese political tradition is essentially self-legitimized and its legitimacy is based on the sage-king's self-cultivated moral merits, and neither the high god *Tian* nor the people played a significant role in a king's election or rule.

The primary resources used for this study are the Hebrew Bible and the Chinese classic *Shu*. As is pointed out by scholars, despite many limitations, difficulties of dating and discrepancies in narratives, the Hebrew Bible remains the major basis for any study of the nature and the concept of kingship in Biblical Israel. The book *shu*, later canonized as one of the so-called five classics of Confucianism, is the earliest collection of royal speeches and court dialogues on government and political thought in China. Being the

first political document in Chinese history, some of its fundamental religio-political concepts, most importantly, the Mandate of Heaven (*Tian Ming*), constitute the foundations of Chinese political thought from the 11th century BCE until the modern period.

By gleaning information from these two original texts, trying to connect and synthesize them into one system of thought, I tried to demonstrate the conceptual build-up of the legitimacy of kingship in the two distinct political traditions in East and West. The question engaged in this research is not “how it really was” but how things are remembered, imagined and transmitted. In both of these two canonized classics, the first kings and those who had the most important impact on later development are justified, glorified and idealized. Through all of these conceptualizing processes a concrete idea of kingship emerges, more clearly defined and ingrained in the collective psyche of the peoples in the East and West. And the concept of kingship would later have a crucial influence on the political thought and the real historical development of those peoples who were heirs to these distinctive traditions.

Based on a draft paper of my research on this subject, I conducted a workshop at the Albright Institute, entitled “Legitimacy of Kingship in Biblical Narrative and Chinese Classic *Shu*: A Comparative Study.” The feedback I received afterwards from the audience and the scholars who read the draft paper helped to clarify some of the issues in my research. Their comments and criticisms are invaluable for my future research on this subject which I will continue after my fellowship at the Albright Institute and on my return to China.

Besides conducting this research, I greatly improved my Hebrew language skills during the five months I spent at the Albright Institute. As Hebrew proficiency is vital for my future teaching and research at Shandong University, where I am a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies and a fellow at the Center for Judaic and Inter-religious Studies, I am especially grateful to the Albright Institute and the Noble Group of Hong Kong which provided me this opportunity.

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