

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ISRAELITES KINGSHIP SYSTEM AND THE ASHANTI TRADITION

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### ABSTRACT

Kingship implies centralized leadership, standing armies and unified authority. This essay focuses on comparative study of the kinship systems of the Israelites and the Ashanti of the Akan tradition in Ghana. It studies the stages of development through which the two traditions passed as kingship emerged, and focuses upon the stage of chiefdom when kings offered leadership on the stead of theocracy. Existing literature were reviewed for this comparison. Through this historical review, it becomes clear that both traditions are religiously (theocratically) inclined in their kingship transactions and that both give much reverence to their kings. They view kingship as symbol of authority. Notwithstanding, while the Ashanti pour libation as a way of invoking the spirit, the Israelites mostly use the Bible as a medium. It is recommended that since the two states adhere to common cultural practices, they can jointly organize cultural festivals to showcase their culture.

### INTRODUCTION

In the history of humanity, leadership has taken place in diverse forms to clearly direct people rather at a simple level, from tribal view or more complexity at a nation level.<sup>2</sup> Ricardo admits that governing system initiated by societies is multiple since the time of history either from a political or a religious perspective: patriarchy, Oligarchy, monarchy and kingship can be cited among more.

Nicole Brisch, writes that kingship is one of the most ancient enduring governing system in the history of humanity.<sup>3</sup> Since time immemorial, kingship has been one of the norms in terms of governance to be known as starting point of first political societies.

### THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

In authority was seen as a divine position and function because power, respect, leadership, supremacy and all authority were all intended to be dedicated to the gods. Therefore, kingship as a form of governance was seen to be “Devine” (from and for gods) such view point influenced Israel which was being surrounded by ancient Near East. In Israel, authority was considered to be given by Yahweh: Yahweh himself was power; I am the lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2, Holy Bible, New International Version), he says for the lord is our King, it is he who saves us Isaiah 33:22.

To rule over his chosen people (Israel) throughout the Old Testament, God had put his authority in leaders such as the patriarchs, the judges and prophets. For example, the vindication of God for Moses before his brother and sister in numbers 12:6-15 can respond to the authority he has invested in Moses over them. Nathan in 2 Samuel 13 was given authority by God to rebuke David. The leaders in general were

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<sup>2</sup> Ricardo Diegue, Kinship in the Ancient Near East: Its application to Israel OT’s Kings. A Research.Paper Submitted to Dr. Archie W. England of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Brisch, Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in Ancient World and Beyond, ed. Nicole Brisch (Chicago: The Oriented Institute of the university of Chicago, 2008).

chosen by Yahweh and empowered to exercise their leadership. The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of “Kingship” among the Ashanti’s of Ghana and Israel in the Ancient Near East, understand the implications and their office and the functions and their application.

### **MOMENTS OF KINGSHIP IN ISRAEL**

After the 13thc.B.C.E. the highlands of Israel were increasingly settled. Society was organized tribally, and there was no capital city. According to the Bible, after c.1025B.C.E. a new **centralized** political system arose, first under Saul, and then David and Solomon. This is the era of the United **Monarchy**. After Solomon’s death (c922B.C.E.), the single kingdom was divided into two kingdoms, “Israel” in the north (capital city: Samaria), and “Judah” in the south.

Until the kingship system, Israel’s social existence was founded on the premise of being distinct from all peoples by virtue of divine election.<sup>4</sup> A dominant element in Israel’s socio-political thought prior to the reign of David is the principle that appointment to leadership was by divine inspiration. The essence of Israel’s special status is defined in a programmatic divine statement in the book of Exodus. “Now then if you obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured (or special) possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but shall be to me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6; cf. Deut. 7:6, 14:2, 26:18).

The establishment of kingship represented a major transformation for Israel. It was not only a change in institutional structures but also a major shift in categories for understanding the nature of Israel’s life as a community and its relationship to God.<sup>15</sup> The concept of the state results from Israel’s viewing its own place in the history and the place of the surrounding people as a reflection of the principles upon which the world was created.

The book of Samuel in general, and Chaps. 8-15 in particular, reflect the tensions and ambiguities of the traditional times. Israel’s transformation was theological. The Old Testament traditions of covenant community resisted and came with the emerging ideology of royal community. Covenant community had been rooted in understanding of the sovereignty of God. Israel was the people of a divine King. When Gideon was asked by some of the people to become King following his victory over Median, he refused, saying: I will not rule of you, and my son will not rule over you; the lord will rule over you”<sup>6</sup> (Judges 8:23). The outgoing ruler appointed his successor. The principle of discontinuity in the chain of leadership resulted in interregal gaps between saviours. These were periods of decline in Israel’s political ascendancy. The shortcomings inherent in non-continuous rule of divine emissaries were felt in the fate autochthonous population of Canaan for possession of agricultural (Jos. 17:14 -18; Judg. 1: 19, 34-35; 18:1-31) and pasture land (1Chron. 4:39-43;5:9-10;7: 21, 8:13), and for political supremacy in the area.<sup>7</sup> The ups and downs of the prolonged military struggle led to the recognition that for the people to exist an independent political entity, a centralized government and predetermined procedures of succession were essential prerequisites. The implementation of the demand to replace the sporadic rule of the judge-saviour by instituting a monarchy was delayed until the middle of the eleventh century B.C.E. when ecological –economic and socio-organizational factors combined with external political circumstances finally tipped the scales in favour of a more centralized and continuous form of government.

Early Kingship was seen by some as a rejection of divine Kingship. Covenant community was understood as a tradition of special relationship to God, who had been made to Israel through the Exodus experience and the covenant making at Mt. Sinai. The desire to have a king arises in 1 Samuel 8 as the impulse to be “like other nations” (vv. 5 and 20).

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<sup>4</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, *King, cult, and calendar in ancient Israel*. (Jerusalem: The Magness Press, 1986), 9-17.

<sup>5</sup> James W. Fianagan, *Chiefs in Israel*. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament.*, (1981)20:47-73.

<sup>6</sup> Judges 8:25

<sup>7</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, *King, cult, and calendar in ancient Israel*. (Jerusalem: The Magness Press, 1986),9-17

Israel's transformation was sociopolitical. The emergence of kingship in Israel did not result from abstract theological debates. Internal and external crises exposed the weaknesses of Israel's tribal life and created the pressure to adopt kingship as an alternative.<sup>8</sup>

When Samuel was old, his sons proved to be corrupt and unworthy successors to judge Israel (8:1-3). The house of Eli before Samuel had fallen under God's judgment. It is in this context that the elders of Israel sought to request a King (8:4-5)

Samuel appears as God's prophet. As such, he is commanded by God to give the people a king. The book of Judges is constantly reminded about Israel lack of a King. "In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judg 17:6, 21: 25). Because there was no King, everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The advent of monarchy was the only solution to the lawless years of Israel.<sup>9</sup>

It is on record that Saul is being considered as Israel's first King being portrayed as an attractive leader (1 Samuel Chap 11). In general terms, 1 Samuel 8-15 divides into large segments. (Chap 8-12) tells us how Saul became a King; Chaps 13-15 tells us how Saul lost Kingship.

### THE OFFICE OF KINGSHIP IN ISRAEL

The office of kingship in Israel was supposed to be in concordance to Yahweh's rules because his Kingship was over the human ruler and for that matter, the human King was actually ruling over His people and this King himself was part of Yahweh's Kingdom.

Throughout the books of Kings, Samuel, and Chronicles, it is obvious that there was always a dependence on what the "Book" states in order for the Israel nation to succeed before the pagan people. There was a direct link between the kingship and the law of God; Saul's reign (1 Samuel 8-15). David's reign (1 Samuel 16-31, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings 2 and 1 Chronicles 11-29) Solomon's reign (1 Kings 3-11 and 2 Chronicles 19) Hezekiah's reign (2 Kings 18-20, 2 Chronicles 29-32 etc.) Psalm 101 is described as "code of conduct for a King".

Helen Ann Kenik, "Code of conduct for a King: Psalm 101 Journal of Biblical Literature Volume 95, No. 3 (September, 1976)

When it comes to the characters of the King in Israel, many scholars agree that, unlike in Western culture in modern time, the king incarnates both political and religious or priestly functions. There was no such thing like separation of church and state. It was the time of the theocratic nation: God ruled through the chosen king. Chalmers use Psalm 110:4 as a proof of royal coronation with the mention "in the order of Melchizedek". This means simply that the king was also at the order of priest. Nevertheless, the author considers that at this level, the king was viewed simply as a standard religious character because in the cultic regulations found in the book of Leviticus there is no specificity about the role of the king in religious life of the people but he was a member of the laity with no special or unique prerogatives. Some of the royal psalms described the role of the King. Psalm 72 presents some attributes that characterize the King: justice, righteousness, and wellbeing; and some of the topics are around the needy and agricultural fertility. The King is seen as an advocate for the helpless. Chalmers states that Kings established, maintained and reformed the central cult by building temples for instance. Further, Ahaz is an example of a king not only building an altar for God but also offering sacrifices (2 King 16). The King also played the role of a leader of the people in terms of embedding to the God's worship perspective and protecting them against other nation's physical invasion or fault theological infiltration.

### Conclusion

It is historically proved and biblically reported that the integration of Kingship in Israel was a revolution under the influence of the outside cultures of the ancient Near Eastern nations, basically

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<sup>8</sup> James W. Fianagan, Chiefs in Israel. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament.*, (1981)20:47-73

<sup>9</sup> Robert P. Gordon, I & II Samuel: A commentary (Grand Reycids, MI: Regency Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 109

Mesopotamian and Egyptian. The Kingship model brought from the invasion of the Philistines and the Ammonites had greatly influenced the kingship system of Israel. Not only the chosen people of God once rejected the prophetic system and yearned for the monarchic one like “all the other nations”, they also brought enough of the same principles of leadership that characterized a King in terms of roles and functions. In both ancient Near East and Israel royal governances, the Kings were watch-doges over the religious and cultic activities and beliefs of their respective people. However, while the Egyptian Pharaoh was a god incarnated in a human body, the Babylonian King was mostly a member of the laity, yet highly regarded as representative of the gods on earth and among people. On the other hand, the Hebrews’ King was a fully man but of course “chosen” by Yahweh; the kingship was still the “divine kingship of God” over Israel through the leadership of the anointed one”. Therefore, in both cultures the kings were functioning as high priests. They fight to erect temples for God and gods. They stage as judicial instance for the divine laws. Also, the king of Israel, as in the other cultures, was the commander-in chief-of the army of God. By observing the path of governing system when it comes to state and religion relationship, one major question that should rise may be whether there has been a cessation of the God’s kingship in political leadership or it still remains in modern Israel’s government.

### THE ASHANTI KINGSHIP

Having looked at the kingship system in Israel, it is equally important to consider the kinship system of the Ashanti’s in an attempt of comparing the two kingships. This section looks at the Asante, elections, legal systems and the golden stool and spirit of the Ashanti.

#### The Asante/Ashanti

The Asante are located in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The 2010 population census estimated the population in the region at 4,780, 380; and Kumasi, the traditional capital of the Asante, at 2,035,064.<sup>10</sup> Even though there is migrant population, it is arguable that the Asante form greater proportion of the population in this region. The Asante are part of a socio-cultural group known as the Akan. This group consists of the Akwamu, Guan, Fante, Denkyra, Brong, Akyem, Kwahu, Sefwi, Wassa, Akwapim, Assin and Asante.

Geographically, the Akan occupy the western, central and Ashanti regions and parts of the Brong-Ahafo, eastern regions of Ghana and the eastern part of the Ivory Coast. There is Consensus that together with the rest of these Akan groups, the Asante have migrated from ancient Mesopotamia to sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>11</sup> Each of the Akan ethnic groups is autonomous but linked by similar culture and the Twi language.

The Asante is lineal and thus, divided into clans. There are eight clans in Asante. A person belongs to the clan of his or her mother. This means all extended family members in this society, as earlier indicated, trace their descent from a common ancestress. In other words, the matrilineal family consists of all persons, whether male or female, who have descended from a common ancestress. The basis of the genealogy is the common blood that feeds and nurtures the child in the mother’s womb. The peculiarity involved here is that the matrilineal blood passes only through females. This naturally leads to a system of diagonal succession where the matrilineal blood dies with every male member.<sup>12</sup> This means males are only regarded as members of the matri-family during their lifetime. This implies children belong to their mother’s family and not to their father’s According to Peter K. Sarpong, the matrilineal society is governed by certain norms, namely:

1. The clans or lineal groups are exogamous (i.e., people marry from outside it.)

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<sup>10</sup> Statistical Service Ghana 2012: 1, 8.

<sup>11</sup> V. S. Gedzi, *Principles and Practices of Dispute Resolution in Ghana: Ewe and Akan Procedures in Females’ Inheritance and Property Rights*. PhD Thesis, Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam. (Maastricht: Shaker Publishing BV 2009).

<sup>12</sup> N. A. Josiah-Aryeh, *The Property Law of Ghana*. (Accra: Sakumo Publishers, 2005), 116.

2. Women are more important than men are. Women continue the lineage while the latter ends with men.
3. Ideally, there is a collective ownership of property or wealth by the clan. The property does not belong to individuals. Individuals receive and use it but cannot dispose of it.
4. Succession, inheritance and rank are all determined lineally. This means one succeeds in his or her clan and inherits in his or her clan.
5. The kinship terminology deals with sociological as well as biological factors.<sup>13</sup>

That is, one's father's brothers are one's fathers while one's mother's sisters are one's mothers. This means these people must treat one as if they are one's biological father or mother. In the matrilineal kinship and family system, maternal siblings take precedence over the spouse in many spheres of life. This includes investment decisions and the joint acquisition of property.<sup>14</sup>

Many Akan proverbs encapsulate the importance of this maternal relationship over the paternal. For example, *Enii yenntoor* 'One can easily get oneself a partner but not another'; and *Dabre me maame awoor* 'provided my mother gives birth and I have a sibling', it does not matter whether there is a father or not.<sup>15</sup> Further, a wife and a husband in theory have no right to inherit each other's property. Additionally, children do not inherit from their father. This is because, as indicated, the clan owns the property. In other words, one cannot succeed his or her husband or father because one's clan determines all these things.

One succeeds and inherits in his or her own clan. This is why, when there is dispute over succession or inheritance, the chief tries to find out the clan of the disputing parties. The matrilineal family members enjoy common ownership of property. Moreover, they are liable to contribute to pay family debts and possess the rights of representation at family meetings. Further, the head of the family holds all property in trust and also manages and controls it on behalf of members.<sup>16</sup> The purpose of the write-up is to highlight who the Asante of Ghana are; and to clear probable misconceptions and miscommunication about this socio-cultural group.

This knowledge about the Asante may create peaceful co-existence for foreigners who may want to have business interactions with them. The significance of the study is that it has contributed both nationally and internationally to anthropological theory about people of other cultures like the Asante of Ghana.

### **Election of Chiefs**

The election of chiefs and the Asantehene himself followed a pattern. The senior female of the chiefly lineage nominated the eligible males. This senior female then consulted the elders, males and female, of that line. The final candidate is then selected. The nomination is then sent to a council of elders, who represent other lineages in the town or district. The Elders then present the nomination to the assembled people.<sup>17</sup>

If the assembled citizens disapprove of the nominee, the process is restarted. Chosen, the new chief is en-stooled by the Elders, who admonish him with expectations. The chosen chiefs swear a solemn oath to the Earth Goddess and to his ancestors to fulfill his duties honourably in which he sacrifices himself and his life for the betterment of the Oman (state).

This elected and en-stooled chief enjoys great majestic ceremony to this day with much spectacle and celebration. He reins much despotic power, including the ability to make judgment of life and death on

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<sup>13</sup> Peter, K Sarpong, *Peoples Differ. An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization*. (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers.,2002), 64-7

<sup>14</sup> C. Oppong *Middle Class African Marriage*. (London: George Allen & Unwin (Publishers)

<sup>15</sup> Kofi, Awusabo-Asare (1990), 15

<sup>16</sup> Kofi Awusabo-Asare (1990), 117

<sup>17</sup> Kwadwo, Osei, *An Outline of Asante History*. Part 1 (3rd ed.). (Suame-Kumasi: O. Kwadwo Enterprise. 2001)

his subjects. However, he does not enjoy absolute rule. Upon the stool, the chief is sacred, the holy intermediary between people and ancestors. His powers theoretically are more apparent than real. His powers hinge on his attention to the advice and decisions of the council of elders. The chief can be impeached, destooled, if the Elders and the people turn against him. He can be reduced to man, subject to derision for his failure.

### **Legal system of the Ashanti**

Legally, the Ashanti state is a theocracy. It invokes religious, rather than secular-legal postulates. What the modern state views as crimes, Ashanti view as sins. Antisocial acts disrespect the ancestors, and are only secondarily harmful to the community. If the chief or king fails to punish such acts, he invokes the anger of the ancestors, and is therefore in danger of impeachment. The penalty for some crimes (sins) is death, but this is hardly imposed; a more common penalty is banishment, mentorship or imprisonment. The king typically exacts or commutes all capital cases. These commuted sentences by King and chiefs sometimes occur by ransom or bribe; they are regulated in such a way that they should not be mistaken for fines, but are considered as revenue to the state, which for the most part welcomes quarrels and litigation. Commutations tend to be far more frequent than executions.

Ashanti are repulsed by murder, and suicide is considered murder. They decapitate those who commit suicide, the convention punishment for murder. The suicide thus had contempt for the court, for only the King may kill an Ashanti.<sup>18</sup>

In a murder trial, intent must be established. If the homicide is accidents, the murder pays compensation to the lineage of the deceased. The insane cannot be executed because of the absence of responsible intent-except for murder or cursing the King; in the case of cursing the king, drunkenness is a valid defense. Capital crimes include murder, incest within the female or male line, and intercourse with a menstruating woman, rape of a married woman, and adultery with any of the wives of a chief or the King. Assaults or insults of a chief or the court or the King also carried capital punishment. Cursing the king, calling down powers to harm the king, is considered as unspeakable act and carries the weight of death. One who invokes another to commit such an act must pay a heavy indemnity. Practitioners of sorcery and witchcraft receive death but not by decapitation, for their blood must not be shed. They receive execution by staging, burning, or drowning.

Ordinarily, families or lineage settle disputes between individuals. Nevertheless, such disputes can be brought to trial before a chief by uttering the taboo oath of a chief or the King. In the end, the King's Court is the sentencing court, for only the king can order the death penalty. Before the Council of Elders and the King's Court, the litigants orate comprehensively. Any one present can cross-examine the defendant or the accuser, and if the proceedings do not lead to a verdict, a special witness is called to provide additional testimony. If there is only one witness, their sworn oath assures the truth is told. Moreover, that he favours or is hostile to either litigant is unthinkable. Cases with no witness, like sorcery or adultery are settled by ordeals, like drinking poison.

Ancestors Veneration establishes the Ashanti moral system, and it provides the principal foundation for governmental sanctions. The link between mother and child centers the entire network, which includes ancestors and fellow men as well. Its judicial system emphasizes the Ashanti conception of rectitude and good behaviour, which favours harmony among the people. The rules were made by *Nyame* (God) and the ancestors, and one must behave accordingly.

### **The Golden Stool and the spirit of the Ashanti**

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<sup>18</sup> K. Nkansah-Kyeremateng. *The Akans of Ghana: Their customs, history, and Institutions*. Accra: Sebewie de Ventures, 2004), 53-66

It is believed that the Ashanti Kingdom in Ghana and for that matter kingship was established in the seventeenth century by King Osei Tutu I, with the help of his feared Priest OkomfoAnokye. The myth is told that OkomfoAnokye conjured the famous Golden Stool from sky and landed it on the lap of King Osei Tutu, the first King of the Ashanti. The Fetish priest declared that the soul of the nation resided in the stool and the people must preserve and respect it. Ashanti believe that just as a man could not live when his soul is taken, so the Asante people would disappear from history if ever the Golden stool were taken away from them. Covered with pure gold, the Golden Stool is never allowed to touch the ground. When a new Ashanti King is installed, he is merely lowered and passed over the stool three times without touching it. Whenever the golden stool is taken out on special occasions, the Ashantehene follows it. The Ashanti Kingdom was rich in gold reserves; hence it grew in popularity and became the Centre of the gold trade, which was largely responsible for the development of Ghana into a powerful, centralized kingdom.

### A Comparative Analysis of Israel and Ashanti

To start with, one can consider the source of documents. With the Israelites kinship, the major sources of information have been the Pentateuch whereas that of Ashanti Rattray.<sup>19</sup> On the concept of deity, the Ashanti's believe in the Supreme God who is the creator of all things just as the Israelites. Again, in the case of the Ashanti, kinship is based on matrilineal descend, succession and inheritance with mother and mother's brother. But with the Israelites, patriarchal is the core authority vested in the father over both wife and children. On the rules of endogamy, one cannot marry from one's clan in the case of the Ashanti but among the Israelites, marriage is forbidden outside or to the foreigner who has not accepted God(Yahweh).

Both kingships revered the presence of spirits in an object. In the case of the Israelites, they considered the Ark of the Covenant as the symbol of God dwelling amongst them. The ark went before the Israelites in the wilderness journeys ...Num 10 verse 33. It was instrumental on the crossing of Jordan on dry land under Joshua, also very useful in the capture of Jericho. In the same vein, the golden stool symbolizes the spirit of the Ashanti's. The golden stool was declared the soul of the Ashanti. Kingship resided in the stool and that the people preserved and respected it. Among the Ashanti's the king is the embodiment of his people and he mirrors aspect of life in the society. This means any judgment passed in the institution reflects on the whole populace, just as God judged the Israelites according to their Kings. It is recommended that since the two states adhere to common cultural practices, they can jointly organize cultural festivals to showcase their culture.

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<sup>19</sup> R. S Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

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