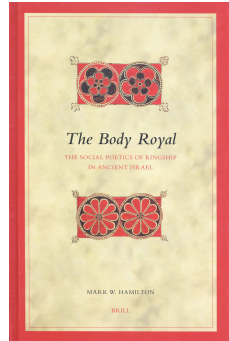


# ○ A REVIEW OF MARK HAMILTON, *THE BODY ROYAL: THE SOCIAL POETICS OF KINGSHIP IN ANCIENT ISRAEL*

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An assertion that is hardly debatable by anyone is in the onset of Mark Hamilton's book: 'The body remains an abiding obsession of the human species as far as we can trace it...' (p. 1). Ancient Israelite texts make no exception of this rule and still the politics and the poetics of the body in those texts have received too little attention until recent time. Of course, the ancient body must not be regarded in modern dimensions; the ancient Israelite body is not the body we usually think about. The traditional western dichotomy mind-body hardly works there as a producer of verbal meanings. This is why the biblical Israelites think with their hearts, and the way each of them thinks may be determined by the shape and condition of his/her heart. Kindheartedness, on the other hand, is understood as a function of the womb, *rahum*, this is where the adjective *rahamim*, or kindhearted, comes from. It is a characteristic feature of some heroic men, but above all – of the Lord himself.

The Hebrew Bible is rich with bodies that are differentiated along the lines of physical status, gender and social position. Yet there is one among them which occupies a central position; it functions as an icon of social and religious views, propagated by the Book – the body of the king. Writing about it, Mark Hamilton inevitably becomes engaged with the necessity of making large-scale summaries, of comments on matters that relate to the history and ideology of the biblical text, and mainly of performing in the context of the huge amount of work that a number of scholars on biblical kingship have accomplished up to this moment. Such a starting point is both intimidating and rewarding. Intimidating, because it requires a skillful orientation in the vast labyrinth of someone else's thoughts. Rewarding, since it authorizes a choice of a personal policy as opposed to many other positions. Mark Hamilton's personal policy is embodied in his clear opposition to the traditional research on kingship. The tradition, in his view – with a few exceptions in the last couple of decades – is focused 'largely on recovering the history of events or interpretation rather than on reconstructing social ideas about kingship in general and of the king's

body in particular' (p. 3). Hamilton, it should be emphasised, is knowledge of and proficient in the vast body of biblical research on kingship; he declares in a coherent way his accord or his disagreement with particular writers and their ideas. 'There is nothing new about a study of Israelite kingship, he admits. There is much new in one that tries to understand Israelite conceptions of the different anatomy, and the appropriate display, discipline, purification, and training of, and care for, the royal body' (p. 29). The language of these lines reminds us of Foucault and his groundbreaking work on the history of the human body. Indeed Mark Hamilton works with the vocabulary as well as with some major ideas of Foucault, especially those which perceive the body as a model of the social world, yet he is critical of other concepts, warning that the French scholar 'must be used with great caution' (p. 14). The methodology of his work is much indebted to Ernst Kantorowicz and his famous book *The King's Two Bodies* (1957). Yet even on this occasion, Hamilton reads Kantorowicz through the lenses of evaluation. He modifies the already classical two-body idea by saying that we better count three: the biosocial body, the body politic, and the 'perpetual body' of the king (David as a model royal body would be a good case in point). As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, these bodies – either two or three – are intimately intertwined; their separation is possible only as a mental act of interpretative surgery upon the whole range of ideas suggested by the text.

Methodologically, Hamilton's research strives to accomplish the 'golden' intersection between the tradition of historical-critical scholarship and alternative approaches elaborated by the recent research in the humanities. In the first place, there is the semiotic theory and practice after the manner of Umberto Eco. Hamilton's research pays close attention to signs; one of its vital goals is formulated as 'the discernment among the textual and nontextual facts of a code of signs relating to kings, male bodies, and royal bodies, that is, a set of ideas and behaviors that existed in ancient Israel and, in different ways, in its neighbors' (p. 7). Hamilton's writing also assimilates the language of ritualistic anthropology; it is well informed by recent performativist approaches to ritual. The final result may be defined as an attempt to understand ancient Israelite texts as 'records of ritual behavior and as reflections of underlying systems of signs' (p. 266) by uncovering them in light of close historical and literary-critical examination.

Kingship, as I already said, is the general thematic background of Mark Hamilton's book. The author is an adherent of the idea that kingship – far from being an alien intrusion on Israelite life – was an intrinsic and vital institution which functioned, and therefore should be studied, as 'a bundle of signs' quintessentially representing the basic biblical notions of power, both human and divine. The body of the king – which is the specific and innovative thematic centre of the present research – is also a code that 'signifies for Israelite spectators at once every male, the society, the cosmos, and even Yahweh' (p. 266). The Hebrew Bible makes use of it as a symbol of society, an icon of God and an index of the divine-human relationship (p. 183).

Rather than following diligently the biblical narratives, or constructing a rigid ethic paradigm of kingship, Hamilton's research identifies crucial moments of royal representation and then subjects them to a close reading. Three main objects (or verbal bodies) of critical scrutiny are clearly drawn and distinguished: the Royal psalms (Chapters 2–3), the Deuteronomistic narratives about kings (Chapters 4–6) and biblical descriptions of foreign kings (Chapter 7).

The Royal psalms, according to Mark Hamilton, should be considered as having been created predominantly during the period of the Israelite monarchy; historically Hamilton stays quite in tune with dominant, mainstream Biblical studies. The psalms are representative of court created,

monarchically centered, official discourse. The king's body in them is above all an icon of royal power and a symbol of divine protection. The king is often portrayed as being like Yahweh. First of all, he is a great warrior; 'this warlikeness requires that the king's body be strong, supported in battle, and skilled' (p. 115). Another 'bundle of signs' is centered upon his exalted maleness: king-lover and king-procreator. It is not difficult to believe that these psalms are 'virtually silent about women, except to the extent that they are icons of groups of foreigners (including, perhaps primarily, males) (p. 121). The king's self-display is an obligatory feature of psalmodic representation. Once again it is a self-display of military prowess, above all. 'It is striking', the author concludes, 'how pervasive the military imagery is in these psalms, how it influences every aspect of the king's life, shaping even the depiction of sexuality' (p. 116). Then he goes on raising a short series of very interesting and current problems: 'How persuasive was the presentation of kingship in these psalms, and how pervasive was this view in the society? How persuasive was the portrayal of a petty ruler as a universal sovereign?' (p. 116). The book does not offer distinct answers to these questions. However, just raising them sounds already as a challenge. In general, we could say that Mark Hamilton is more convincing in his summaries than in the specific, close-reading work on certain pieces of biblical discourse.

Military imagery and military symbolism will come once again to the fore of his research in Chapter 7, 'The Body of the Foreign King', but now it is quite a different paradigm of representation and verbal suggestion. The Bible's portrayals of foreign kings become verbal reality mostly through the lenses of official Judahite propaganda, or as Mark Hamilton says, 'the Bible refracts genuine knowledge of foreign beliefs and practices through the prism of Israelite conceptions of their own kings' (p. 263). A foreign king means always a threat, even when it is Judah which threatens (or just wishes to have threatened) a foreign kingdom. The concentration on the military aspects of the royal body is still here, though representations of hair, clothing and other elements of self-display do not play a role of importance. The author discerns mainly an interest in arms and legs, which are depicted as either strong or broken, either skilled or helpless. Still, the most characteristic feature in the Bible's representation of foreign kings is its tendency to regard their historical and political presence in terms of contestation between them and Yahweh. This contestation often takes the form of verbal sparring, 'a major topic of which is the proper display and even characteristic of the royal body' (p. 264). No need do say that this kind of 'historical' representation and symbolic suggestion is highly mythological; we can speak of a mythological approach to the construction of national history and national identity.

The greatest part of the book (pp. 118–222) deals with the Bible's historical, mainly Deuteronomistic, narratives about kings. In comparison with the Royal psalms these are less official texts which may offer alternative glimpses of historically specific royal 'bodies'. At times they even 'deconstruct the official views or draw implications latent within them, thus both critiquing and revitalizing royal traditions' (p. 118). According to Mark Hamilton this difference is due to predominantly extrinsic reasons; it became possible 'in response to externally induced crises (read: invasions) as well as to the ongoing theological and political reflection of various 'elite' groups within Israelite society' (p. 118). The Israelite ritual of coronation is exposed to most detailed examination. It is generally accepted to be of vital social importance because the royal body which was created through the use of different indexes of power started signifying the basic structure of a cosmos 'in which Yahweh brought order in the form of justice to the vulnerable and security to all those whose bodily actions coincided with the proper order of things' (pp.

143–144). Here again, as in many chapters of the book, Mark Hamilton reads key stories, which highlight the king's body, its display and (either 'real', or imaginary) anatomy. He implies the method of the 'disparate threads' – narrative and thematic lines, which go into seemingly different directions but become neatly entwined at the end of each chapter.

Throughout all of his research the author displays keen awareness of gender issues. His study of the king's body engages in discerning and defining what may be called 'normative maleness' in ancient Israel. It is the 'body royal' which turns into an icon of accomplished biblical masculinity. The book exposes and justifies the fact that the ideas of masculinity, as well as the ideas of kingship, were not perceived as a fixed datum in ancient Israel. The king's body, 'its nature, purpose and proper use of display' (p. 268) was an incessant object of debate and negotiation. Kingship therefore existed as part of a self-perpetuating society. Hence the concept of 'social poetics of kingship' which is not only a subtitle of the book but also suggests the general strategy of its ideology and methodology.