Lasine, Stuart

Knowing Kings: Knowledge, Power, and Narcissism in the Hebrew

Semeia Studies


Robert L. Cohn
Lafayette College
Easton, PA 18042

In this free-spirited book, unusual in its scope and style, Lasine investigates the relationship between royal power and knowledge in the Bible. He is struck by the paradoxical situation of the king as one who is at the same time powerful yet utterly dependent upon his courtiers, all-knowing yet ignorant, a father figure yet a coddled baby. He is especially concerned with the ways that kings control the flow of information and are seen by and see the populace. In his exploration of biblical kings Lasine depends heavily upon comparative data reaching into the ancient Near East, classical Greece, and British and French royal history, and elsewhere for narratives of royal figures. At the same time he draws upon theory from a number of diverse fields such as information management, psychology, and philosophy to create the discourse in which to analyze the personalities that emerge from the biblical text.

The introduction outlines six royal traits derived from Lasine’s comparative studies to be elaborated in detail in the rest of the book. These traits are in brief: (1) the restless wakefulness of Frazer’s king who is powerful but alone; (2) the king as microcosm of the universe, both center and periphery; (3) the king’s dream of “ocular mastery” (classically in Louis XIV)—seeing the whole world yet being out of reach; (4) the vulnerability of Freud’s “His Majesty the Baby”; (5) the invulnerable king as hedgehog and fox; (6) the king as the center of paradox. Although the discussion of these traits became clearer as I moved through the book, I found myself fairly perplexed at the outset. Already in the introduction one is assaulted by a profusion of epigraphs, discussions of extra-biblical kings, and references to various theorists—an eclectic stew that left me wondering where Lasine was coming from and wishing for better “information management.”
Nevertheless, the book grew on me as I worked through it. Successive chapters focus on Saul, David, and Solomon as well as other ancient Near Eastern kings and royal-like figures such as Job. Finally, Lasine considers YHWH as divine king and offers an extended discussion of “divine narcissism” as the outstanding characteristic of the biblical God.

The style of the book is as creative as its topic and as eclectic as its data. One sees Lasine as an engaging college teacher at work in the continual juxtaposition of biblical verses, characters, and scenes with what he takes to be parallels in contemporary politics and pop culture. Some of these are silly (anointing of a king likened to “guru Ji being crowned with a cream pie by some nut in Detroit,” p. 75), some outrageous (God as “kind of Woody Allen without the whining,” p. 210), and some amazingly apt (“plausible deniability” as a feature of the Reagan and Ramesses administrations, p. 65). But all of them get you thinking and, not infrequently, laughing—no mean feat for a scholarly book. Normal scholarly prose is also interrupted with creative writing genres: ch. 2 focuses on Saul’s massacre of the priests of Nob, taking the form of imaginative second-person psychological analyses of the feelings and motivations of Saul, David, Doeg, and Ahimelech; ch. 4 begins with a dream; ch. 10 is the confession of a biblical scholar (the author’s persona) to a psychiatrist of his personal wrestling with kings and God and biblical scholarship in the process of writing the book.

I found that Lasine’s readings of the Saul and David narratives put their classic struggle in a new light. Saul is a victim of “information disloyalty” while David is a master of information management. David knew, the analyzing voice charges, that kings tend to keep rivals in their courts in order to keep an eye on them and keep them away from their families and supporters. But David used that position and his skill at “impression management” not only to stay alive but, like O. J. Simpson, to get his supporters to cheer, in effect, “Guilty or not, we love you David” (p. 50). Lasine goes on to show how in the Bathsheba incident, David, like a Greek tyrant, “acquires and maintains power—and then abuses that power in order to indulge his illicit desires—by means of invisibility and secrecy” (p. 105). Further, he examines the case of David’s seeming ignorance of Adonijah’s intentions in 2 Kings 1 and interprets his impenetrability in terms of the “deniability” that saved Ronald Reagan from impeachment during the Iran Contra scandal.

Lasine devotes two chapters to the Solomon narratives in Kings and Chronicles and argues that the invisibility of Solomon—we hear nothing about his many wives, his sons, his thoughts or feelings, his experiences—is a way of keeping him concealed in a verbal palace and preventing us, the readers, from knowing the ultimate knower. Then he considers how the purely stereotypical descriptions of Solomon serve to indict his insatiable desires.

Other facets of knowing come into play in the chapters on Eden and Job. Since the power of the king rests in his ability to control the flow of information about himself, gossip, when not spread at the king’s behest, threatens that power. The snake as gossiper tries to penetrate beyond God’s words to his real fear, but Eve, caught up in the gossip takes the fall. Only her, not Adam’s, motivation is exposed: she wants the wisdom, the
panoptic knowledge, which a king must control if he is to remain in power. As a woman, she becomes the scapegoat, sacrificed so that the secret knowledge remains the property of the king alone. The theme of scapegoating, which Lasine develops from René Girard, continues on in the chapter on Job, persecuted both by God and by the community he had formerly sustained. Job’s resistance to his friends’ efforts to make him their scapegoat is as persistent as his calls for God to stand up for him, but God’s answer puts the responsibility for human justice upon human beings, using the persecutors’ means if necessary to rescue victims.

The connection of this analysis to the rest of the book becomes clearer in the next chapter where a biblical scholar persona rants, à la Alexander Portnoy, to his psychotherapist about the narcissistic character of YHWH the king. The loyal courtier Job “becomes a whistle-blower for the silent majority of sufferers, and he wants to Ken Starr with God” (p. 212). Job wants to be in the loop, but God reminds Job “who’s the real narcissist in the family” (p. 213). Working with Freud, Lasine fixes upon the idea of narcissism as the interpretive key to understanding the biblical character of YHWH. YHWH makes Israel special, Lasine contends, so it can serve as his mirror image, but when as humans, Israel can’t live up to that image, he smashes them down. YHWH emerges as an abusing husband or father viewed by his wife or children as god even as he abuses them. Several cogent analyses in this last chapter develop this powerful idea.

Nothing about this book is conventional. Positing the royal knower as a type, Lasine takes his examples from history and literature, from the ancient past and contemporary America. He depends upon and takes issue with not only biblical scholars but also analysts from a variety of fields in his fresh, and frequently humorous, readings of biblical texts and kings. The book is packed with ideas and arguments; an untamed book, I would say, perhaps still in need of some editing. At the same time, one sees here the twists and turns of a scholar at work, and that has its own rewards. The result is a study that offers surprises and one-liners around every bend, establishing Lasine as the “shock jock” of biblical scholarship. Fun aside, this book sets familiar biblical kings in very new contexts and, using a variety of analytic methods, makes a plausible case for new ways of knowing kings.