



The divine confidence trick

Moses exposes as a fraud the notion of any man possessing inherent superior virtue by birthright

PICTURE YOURSELF, if you will, in the place of a lowly Hebrew slave in the service of Pharaoh. From dawn till dusk, from the cradle to the grave, you are beholden to him. Not only that: you belong to him. You're "dust under his feet," as an ancient Egyptian formulation of royal prerogative had it, and your entire worth as a human being is predicated on your value, or lack thereof, as a commodity or beast of burden to him.

And there's more. For the "privilege" of being in his employ by toiling your life away in backbreaking, soul-crushing servitude for his comfort and his glory, you are required to worship him, singing his praise at every turn. For Pharaoh styles himself a god, a superior being.

And so, in confronting the Egyptian god-king while urging him to let the Hebrew slaves go, Moses must not only challenge Pharaoh's authority as a temporal overlord; he must also demonstrably disprove Pharaoh's claims to be divine.

This Moses does, with God's help, through the Ten Plagues, which Pharaoh proves powerless to prevent. Thus the Hebrew prophet became the first man in history (if you believe in the historicity of biblical narratives) or in literature (if you don't) to expose the concept of divine kingship for what it is: a sham, an age-old confidence trick. Dispel the smoke-screen of pomp and pageantry, Moses shows, and the notion of a man, or a self-appointed elite, possessing inherent superior virtue by birthright lies exposed as a fraud.

These days, bona fide god-kings are rather thin on the ground, but I did once meet one. Though no Pharaoh, the late King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia was revered by many of his subjects as a living deity, a real-life deva-raja in the style of ancient Hindu concepts of divine kingship.

During a private lunch in 2007 at Phnom Penh's Grand Palace, to which I found myself invited, Cambodia's "King-Father" did not strike me as a deity personified. Diminutive and slightly bent from age and cancer, the once mercurial monarch proved in his dotage to be an affable grandfather without hoity-toity pretensions. He shook my hands (repeatedly) with avuncular affection and giggled delightfully.

Yet his subjects credited him with godly powers, which he exercised during the annual "plowing of the sacred furrow" fertility ceremony intended to ensure bountiful harvests. His forefathers once embarked on stupendous building projects at the medieval Khmer Empire's Angkor temple complex, which rivaled the pharaohs' monuments in



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splendor and size.

In neighboring Thailand, where the country's royals are likewise officially revered, protocol dictates that in approaching members of the royal family, commoners lie prostrate and refer to themselves as "under the dust on the sole of the royal foot," in a prescribed act of self-debasement that would have appealed to the pharaohs. The peace and prosperity of the realm, citizens are incessantly reminded, depends on the elderly and ailing King Bhumibol Adulyadej's happiness and on his subjects' undivided fealty to him.

A draconian *lèse-majesté* law forbids all criticism (or anything that's construed as such) of the royal family. Scores of people, including the occasional foreigner, have been sentenced to long years in prison during in-camera court hearings where guilt seems automatically presumed. The ultimate crime in Thailand isn't murder; it's disloyalty to the monarchy.

Moses's spiritual successor, the prophet Samuel, remained opposed to the very idea of monarchy and was pressured by the People of Israel to appoint a king over them. Samuel anointed Saul, but not before issuing dire warnings, in one of the most famous indictments of royal privilege on record, about what lay in store for commoners under the rule of kings: injustice, corruption, nepotism and official impunity (1 Samuel 8). The Bible portrays even Israel's most beloved rulers like David and Solomon as fundamentally flawed human beings.

To the prophets, only God was truly sovereign and his authority acted as a check on the powers of kings by denying incumbents unimpeachable legitimacy. Shorn of the benefit of divine status for themselves, kings and queens then set about alleging divine approval for their rule by claiming to act in God's name – another barefaced con job. The prophets duly railed against them, too, and as well they should.

Which brings us back to Pharaoh. He remains nameless in the Bible, and scholars have identified several rulers – Ahmose I, Thutmose IV, Ramses II, Merneptah – as possible candidates. Yet his identity is ultimately beside the point; it's in his anonymity where Pharaoh's universality lies. Moses's antagonist wasn't uniquely evil or capricious. He was simply the embodiment of ruling elites' capacity for insufferable hubris in arrogating divine prerogatives to themselves so as to lord it over the rest of us.

Moses did everyone, not just Jews, a favor by sticking it to him. ■