

The Conflict between Adonijah and Solomon in Light of Succession Practices Near and Far

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The opening chapter of 1 Kings describes a fraternal struggle for succession unlike anything else in the Hebrew Bible: When David was old and apparently unfit to continue his rule,¹ his eldest living son, Adonijah,² gathered a large group of supporters and declared himself king at En Rogel. Meanwhile, back at the palace, Nathan and Bathsheba hatched a plan to place Solomon on the throne instead of his elder brother. They persuaded the senile David that he had promised to designate Solomon as his successor;³ he proceeded to do just that and with the royal imprimatur secured, Solomon was paraded through the city and acclaimed by the people.

When perusing the secondary literature on this chapter, one rarely encounters a discussion of Adonijah's legitimacy. One can open nearly any commentary and find a passing remark about his status as heir presumptive, either confidently asserted or presented as the most likely interpretation of how the system worked.⁴ Such remarks stem from a tacit acceptance that royal

¹ Like most scholars, I interpret the introductory scene describing David's lack of intimacy with Abishag to portray an effete king with neither virility nor, correspondingly, the wherewithal to rule. See, for example, Marvin Sweeney, *I & II Kings* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 53.

² This assumes, with nearly all commentators, that David's second son—Chileab according to 2 Sam 3:3, Daniel according to 1 Chr 3:1—died young. In any event, this son does not factor into the succession struggle recounted in 1 Kings.

³ For this interpretation of 1 Kgs 1:11–14, see Andrew Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East* (WAWSup, 4; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 264–67.

⁴ The terms “crown prince” and “heir presumptive” (or “heir apparent”) are used with varying implications. By “crown prince,” I mean an individual who has been officially designated through some sort of formal procedure, such as designation by the incumbent king or selection by some appointed body. By “heir presumptive/apparent,” I mean an individual who is the most likely candidate to assume the throne in the event of the current ruler's death, but who has not been officially designated in any way and is therefore subject to change.

succession in the early Israelite monarchy was governed by primogeniture—specifically, that the passage of power would have followed a next-in-line system in which, at any given time, the eldest living son of the reigning king would be expected to take the throne upon the death of his father. For example, Lissa Wray Beal writes, “As the eldest surviving child . . . dynastic succession should accord [Adonijah] the throne. . . His birth order . . . places him in the anticipated line of succession.”⁵ Yet the ubiquity of such statements conceals a fairly serious problem that this type of interpretation creates in the narrative: nearly all readers see 1 Kings 1 as composed for the purpose of legitimizing Solomon, but if Adonijah is the heir presumptive, Solomon is obviously *not* the legitimate successor. In and of itself, this issue is not insurmountable; from various parts of the ancient Near East we have preserved royal apologies, that is, texts originally composed for the purpose of legitimizing some outsider who seized the throne. Indeed, even within the biblical corpus we

⁵ Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings* (ApOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 69–70. I cite Wray Beal only because hers is among the most recent commentaries on 1 Kings. Numerous other examples of such interpretation could be provided, including Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Kings*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 9: “Furthermore, as David’s oldest living son, Adonijah was next in line for the throne. . . According to the ancient principle of primogeniture, most people would have said that Adonijah had a legitimate claim to the throne. . . From the merely human perspective, Adonijah’s ambition is thoroughly understandable”; Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 30: “Adonijah son of Haggith is the oldest remaining son (2 Sam. 3), and it is not unreasonable for him to expect to succeed David”; Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings* (SHBC; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 12–13: “Moreover, [Adonijah] is next in birth order to the tragic Absalom (see 2 Sam 3:3–4) and so has a legitimate claim to the throne (see 1 Kgs 2:22)”; Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings* (AB, 10; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 157: “Adonijah . . . was [David’s] eldest living son. Accordingly, he could consider himself the rightful heir”; Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1996), 7, 9: “Adonijah . . . follows Absalom in the presumed line of succession. . . ‘All his brothers, the king’s sons’ suggest that [Adonijah’s] status as heir is uncontested by the younger members of the royal family. Primogeniture is the presumption, if not yet the precedent”; John Gray, *I & II Kings*, 2nd ed. (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 79–80: “Adonijah, the fourth (II Sam. 3.4) and apparently oldest surviving son of David . . . assumes the status of heir-apparent. . . The action of Adonijah indicates the nature of the problem of succession in the new state of Israel, for which apparently David had made no provision. The state of Israel and the institution of the monarchy were young enough for this to be a real problem. . . [The precedent was still judges who were endowed by God *ad hoc* and] Adonijah, therefore, could not presume on the right of primogeniture, though his experience of the monarchy from the early days in Hebron might have given him priority over Solomon.”

Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 54, furnished one exception to this in a major commentary: “There is no indication that [Adonijah] has any specific reason to believe that he is the one to succeed David.”

read narratives that appear to have begun in such a milieu—the sources that eventually spawned the account of David’s rise in 1–2 Samuel probably developed as an early response to David’s detractors, and the story of Jehu’s revolt in 2 Kings 9–10 may have a similar origin. But the Solomonic apology differs from other exemplars of this genre in one significant way: whereas other ancient apologies tend both to justify the dubious deeds of the upstart ruler and legitimize that ruler as the true king, the opening chapters of 1 Kings do only the former. The narrative explains Solomon’s brutal suppression of his enemies but never actually presents him with any right to rule. The rhetoric one typically sees in texts of this sort, legitimizing the king by means of divine election or royal prerogative, is absent, and Solomon was not next in line among David’s sons.⁶

Two aspects of the account of the fraternal struggle illustrate this interpretive problem. First, although the narrator certainly does not portray him favorably, Adonijah, Solomon’s rival, is not accused of any actual crime that would disqualify him from office. Although the narrator clearly dislikes Adonijah, he apparently lacks any particular misdeed for which to indict him.⁷ Second, many readers see the narrator as not just neglecting to conceal but actually highlighting the conspiracy between Nathan and Bathsheba that landed Solomon on the throne. So if Adonijah were indeed the heir presumptive, Solomon in turn is a usurper. This seems to be sloppy Solomonic propaganda, if such indeed it is.⁸

Commentators tend to skirt over this issue, if not ignore it altogether. Continuing with the example of Wray Beal, she reads the account of Solomon’s accession in light of other biblical examples of the elevation of the younger son, concluding that “anomalies against primogeniture throughout the covenantal history alert one to the unique work of YHWH, signalling his sovereign will.” But in addition to failing to justify the Solomonic coup—if anything, this would simply shift the responsibility for the illegitimate action to Yahweh—this ignores the tone of the text at hand, from which Yahweh is almost completely absent.⁹

⁶ See Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, 257–67, esp. 266.

⁷ While getting at the basic idea of the rhetoric, commentators go too far with statements like that of Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Int; Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 19: “The subtle invocation of Absalom’s ghost constrains us to see Adonijah’s moves in the worst possible light. We are led to view him as treasonous rather than simply imprudent.” There is a difference between behavior so egregious that it disqualifies someone from office and behavior that is simply frowned upon. Several examples of the former exist in the comparative literature; see below.

⁸ This disjunction between the apparent motivation for the text’s composition (that is, as propaganda for Solomon) and some of its contents is so acute that it inspired a monograph on “subversive scribal activity”; see Eric A. Seibert, *Subversive Scribes and the Solomonic Narrative: A Rereading of 1 Kings 1–11* (LHBOTS, 436; London: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁹ Yahweh appears only a few times in 1 Kings 1, and never in an

Indeed, Wray Beal's invocation of Yahweh's "sovereign will" being made clear here comes only two paragraphs after her admission that "Solomon's succession is achieved without the express approval of YHWH. . . . Never does he affirm by oath or oracle that the events fulfil his desires. The silence is suggestive and may be construed as revealing his non-sponsorship of the events."¹⁰

The tension in this common understanding of 1 Kings 1 derives from the interpreters' insistence that Adonijah possessed an exclusive claim to David's throne—a position based on the assumption (nowhere suggested in the Hebrew Bible) that primogeniture determined the right of succession in early Israel. The tension dissolves immediately if primogeniture (at least in the context of royal succession) was a foreign concept and the omnipresence of this principle in the secondary literature is an anachronistic scholarly imposition on the text, as I intend to show here.¹¹ In reality, we have no explicit evidence of what principles governed royal succession in this period. My purpose in

active role. He is invoked by Bathsheba when she fabricates the Davidic promise to declare Solomon his successor (1:17), in David's oath in response (1:29–30), and in Benaiah's affirmation of David's actions (1:36–37). David also praises Yahweh for allowing him to see his successor in 1:48, but this is one of the few parts of the chapter that is almost certainly a Deuteronomistic addition.

¹⁰ Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 78, 79. Wray Beal's explanation is not unlike that of Gary N. Knoppers, *Two Nations under God: The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies*, vol. 1: *The Reign of Solomon and the Rise of Jeroboam* (Harvard Semitic Museum Monograph, 52; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 68, who writes, "Adonijah may have been both older than Solomon (1 Sam 20:31; 2 Sam 13:21b [LXX, 4QSam^a]; 1 Kgs 2:22) and favored by the vox populi (1 Kgs 2:15); nevertheless, primogeniture and human popularity are no match for a divine franchise." I find it difficult to appeal to "divine franchise" as the *deus ex machina* for a passage remarkable for the deity's absence.

¹¹ Interestingly, commentators who are the most attuned to the historicity of the biblical text tend also to be those who pay the most attention to primogeniture in Israelite royal succession—even though it is entirely unsupported. For example, in his generally excellent and very historically driven commentary, Cogan, *1 Kings*, 167–68, writes, "In ancient Near Eastern monarchies, the principle of primogeniture was generally recognized [in royal successions], though deviations from the rule, usually the result of favoritism, are known (Ishida 1977, 8, 16, 155). This principle seems to have been recognized during the earliest days of the Israelite monarchy (cf. 1 Sam 20:31), and it helps explain Adonijah's active claim to the throne and perhaps, as well, David's passivity to this show of ascendancy (1 Kgs 1:5–6; cf. 2:15)." This claim seems innocuous given the tendency of Western scholars to treat primogeniture as a universal principle (see my anthropological discussion), but it is in fact entirely unsubstantiated (see my comparative discussion). Cogan does, however, follow the preceding comment immediately with a caveat: "At the same time, the acquiescence of those who supported Adonijah to Solomon's designation, as well as the lack of any signs of rebellion against Solomon, seem to indicate that the reigning king retained the prerogative to select another son, out of the order of succession" (168).

this study, therefore, is to explore the subject of royal succession through the two avenues that are available: first, anthropological work on the transmission of power in tribal and early monarchic societies; and second, succession practices elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Through this examination I determine that in ancient Israel the eldest prince likely had no official preferential claim to the throne; instead, many if not all of the king's sons were equally eligible candidates for succession. In closing, I will return to the story of the struggle between Adonijah and Solomon, reinterpreting the so-called Succession Narrative in light of this alternative view of the fraternal rivals' original standing.

EVIDENCE FOR ROYAL SUCCESSION PRACTICES IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The Hebrew Bible provides no explicit information for how royal successors were selected once the monarchies of Israel and Judah were established. Albrecht Alt famously argued that a system of charismatic kingship—where a king was designated by a prophet on account of being chosen by God for the role, rather than simply being a scion of the previous king—held sway in the north, especially in the first century of the kingdom, a position that gained numerous supporters and detractors over the years.¹² I remain dubious myself. In any event, the northern monarchy appears so unstable during its two centuries of existence, and the record so sparse, that it is impossible to do much more than guess at what sort of protocols governed succession there. In Judah, the dynastic principle unquestionably held: the kingship was to pass from the king to his son. This principle is most famously and overtly expressed in 2 Samuel 7, and the history of the kingdom more or less bears it out.

But to which son? Here the Bible is silent. The issue is not raised in the abstract, and few successions are narrated with sufficient detail to inform us why a particular son assumed the throne. Without evidence one way or another, scholars assume that the eldest son usually took power, but there is a major leap from the dynastic principle (that the kingship is supposed to remain in a single family line, which is amply attested¹³) to primogeniture (that the kingship is supposed to pass automatically to the eldest living son of the king, which is not attested).

¹² Alt writes of “das Ideal des charismatischen Königtums” among the tribes of the Northern Kingdom in his “Das Königtum in den Reichen Israel und Juda,” *VT* 1 (1951), 2–22. For an early response, see T. C. G. Thornton, “Charismatic Kingship in Israel and Judah,” *JTS* 14 (1963), 1–11. Alt considered the kingdom of Judah an “Erbmonarchie,” while in the north complex negotiations between the king and various constituents played a role in the transfer of the throne (“Der Anteil des Königtums an der sozialen Entwicklung in den Reichen Israel und Juda,” in his *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* [Munich: Beck, 1959], 3:348–72, here 363, 366–67).

¹³ The dynastic principle undoubtedly held sway in most, if not all, of the ancient Near East. The evidence for this is manifold and need not be laid out exhaustively, but I will summarize a few points. For starters, in ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions kings universally

Some cite the preference for the eldest son in Israelite inheritance law as a reason to conclude that kingship passed to the eldest via rules of primogeniture, but this is unlikely for a number of reasons. First, it remains disputed that the eldest son did in fact have an automatic advantage over later-born brothers when it came to inheritance. The most frequently cited text in this discussion is Deut 21:15–17, which reads: “If a man has two wives, one loved and the other hated, and both the loved and the hated bear him sons, but the *bəkor* son belongs to the hated wife—then on the day when the man issues his inheritance (*banḥilō*), that which he has, to his sons, he is not able to *bakker* the son of the loved wife over the *bəkor* son of the hated wife. He will acknowledge the *bəkor*, the son of the hated wife, so as to give him a double portion of all that is found to be his, for he is the firstfruits of his strength (*bi’ rē’sūt ’onō*); the custom of the *bəkorā* is his.” We encounter here several forms of the Hebrew root *bkr*, almost universally translated “firstborn” (*bəkor*) or “birthright” (*bəkorā*). Several things stand out about this. On the one hand, the fact that the *bəkor* is called “the firstfruits of his strength” suggests that the term does apply to a biological firstborn.¹⁴ But several things cloud this otherwise clear inference. The fact that

trace their lineage patrilineally: X son of Y son of Z, naming fathers and paternal ancestors. Vassal treaties provide further confirmation, as suzerains compel the lesser kings to swear loyalty to sons and grandsons, and conversely to fight against anyone who would fight against a legitimate scion. Numerous examples exist, from Hatti to Israel to Persia, of usurpers taking the throne and immediately wiping out the entire male progeny of the previous king, demonstrating the tendency of the male line to reemerge and exercise a claim to the throne. In Mesopotamia, W. G. Lambert, “The Seed of Kingship,” in P. Garelli, ed., *Le Palais et la Royauté (Archéologie et Civilisation)* (Paris: Geuthner, 1974), 424–40, esp. 434, traces the idea of the “seed of kingship” from the third millennium through the first, showing that at least from the original entrance of the Amorites, descent from an original royal ancestor assured the legitimacy of the present king. And so on. In Israel specifically, numerous references to the “house of David” illustrate this. Although as Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *The House of David: Between Political Formation and Literary Revision* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 240–46, shows, in the earliest sources the “house of David” refers to a body politic rather than a ruling family, later, more theologically driven texts certainly invoke this term with a dynastic sense. Consider especially 2 Sam 7:16—“Your house and your kingdom will be confirmed forever before me; your throne will be established forever”—which may be Deuteronomistic or may even be part of an original, early oracle, for which see Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, “*Cui Bono?* The Prophecy of Nathan (2 Samuel 7) as a Piece of Political Rhetoric,” in idem, *Reports from a Scholar’s Life: Select Papers on the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 190–213; cf. Antti Laato, “Second Samuel 7 and Ancient Near Eastern Royal Ideology,” *CBQ* 59 (1997), 244–69.

¹⁴ Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 67–68, proposes that *rē’sūt ’onō* could “mean ‘the best’ rather than ‘the first of his strength.’” While Greenspahn’s discussion of *bəkor* is generally strong, I find this particular interpretation to be forced.

we see a denominative verb from the same root, *lābakkēr*, begs explanation. Most translations render this “treat as firstborn,” but “declare as chief heir” seems equally probable.¹⁵ Even if “treat as firstborn” is accurate, though, this demonstrates the father’s role in awarding his inheritance, which is also signalled by the existence of the verb *lāhanḥīl* “issue inheritance, bequeath.” Several biblical narratives feature the elevation of younger sons over the elder (most notably Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau); although the motif trades on this being a remarkable event, it does not necessarily follow that the rise of younger sons was all that unusual.¹⁶ Moreover, as Frederick Greenspahn points out, the Deuteronomic code does not forbid assigning a younger son as *bākōr* on other grounds—this may just be a reflex of Deuteronomy’s concern with the vulnerable, in this case, an unloved wife.¹⁷ Greenspahn seems well supported when he concludes that “the position of *bākōr* was an assigned, not an automatic status, even if eldest sons were most likely to achieve its benefits. Deuteronomy 21 need not, therefore, be understood as an effort to eliminate a legal loophole whereby certain children were fictitiously designated firstborn in order to circumvent the rigidities of primogeniture, but simply as amending accepted procedure by limiting the criteria to which the selection of a *bākōr* could be made.”¹⁸

¹⁵ On this topic see especially Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 48–69, esp. 57–59; also idem, “Primogeniture in Ancient Israel,” in Joseph E. Coleson and Victor H. Matthews, eds., *Go to the Land I Will Show You: Studies in Honor Dwight W. Young* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 71–79.

¹⁶ Cf. Gary N. Knoppers, “The Preferential Status of the Eldest Son Revoked?” in Steven L. McKenzie, Thomas Römer, and Hans Heinrich Schmid, eds., *Rethinking the Foundations: Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible, Essays in Honour of John Van Seters* (BZAW, 294; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 115–26. Knoppers argues that while the preference for the younger son appears commonly in the Hebrew Bible, it is always presented as exceptional. This should be taken as evidence not for the absence of primogeniture, but for the flexibility to circumvent primogeniture in certain situations: “The rule of primogeniture was never absolute. A father could exercise some discretion in succession and inheritance” (120). Knoppers is undoubtedly correct about the father’s ability to exercise discretion, but I do not agree that the reader must view all of these situations as exceptional.

¹⁷ Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 57–58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 59. On the whole, *bākōr* is an interesting term on which one could write far more. The term is clearly fluid, with different meanings in different contexts (and, I suspect, at different times). In the Hebrew Bible, three *bākōrīm* are overtly declared to be royal successors. I discuss two of these, Meshah’s son (2 Kgs 3:27) and Jehoram (2 Chr 21:3), below. The third is the son of pharaoh struck down during the plague: “And every *bākōr* in the land of Egypt—from the *bākōr* of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the *bākōr* of the maidservant behind the mill to every *bākōr* of cattle—will die” (Exod 11:5). This latter instance certainly seems to refer to a firstborn son designated for succession—I do not mean to suggest that the tenth plague involved the death of all the chief heirs of Egypt (including the chief heirs of the cattle). Here, however, it is only the context that dictates that *bākōr* means “firstborn,”

Even more important than the meaning of *bākōr* when evaluating the impact of inheritance law on royal succession practices, however, is the fact that the two are not analogous. Even if the Deuteronomic code did stipulate that the biological firstborn earned a double portion and if the multifarious biblical examples of this being circumvented were all exceptions to a fixed rule, succeeding to an office is fundamentally different than inheriting an estate.¹⁹ Moreover, one aspect of Israelite inheritance that is not contested is that estates were divided among sons. In some societies with a strong impulse for primogeniture, the eldest son inherits the father's entire holding and other sons are left to fend for themselves, but this does not appear to be the case in ancient Israel. While granting the firstborn special inheritance rights has occasionally corresponded with passing on titles and offices to the eldest, as with the Ming dynasty,²⁰ this is by no means always the case.

One other possible bit of evidence for royal succession practices in ancient Israel comes from the presence of queen mothers named in the descriptions of reigns in 1–2 Kings. Women are drastically underrepresented in the Deuteronomistic History, yet following the division of the kingdom the queen mother is named for all but two kings.²¹ These not easily explained mentions may result from the status of the queen mother as helping bestow legitimacy on the successor. But this evidence is circumstantial, and we are not granted more insight into the roles of these women either in royal succession or other aspects of life.

just as elsewhere context dictates that *bākōr* is a transferable status and therefore not strictly a reflection of biological priority (I doubt any Egyptian bull favored a younger calf and elevated him to be his chief heir, regardless of his affection or lack thereof for the cow who birthed him). Also, I doubt that whether Pharaoh's biological firstborn son was his appointed successor was of any consequence whatsoever to the biblical author here.

¹⁹ As Jack Goody, "Introduction," in Jack Goody, ed., *Succession to High Office* (Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, 4; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 1, notes, "while the transfer of property and of office are often closely linked (English lawyers refer to both as succession), certain broad differences must be borne in mind." Goody adopts a separate terminology for dealing with the two matters, referring to heir (and holder) with regard to inheritance and successor (and incumbent) with regard to office. I do not strictly follow this distinction in this essay because "heir apparent/presumptive" is a common, and useful, term in succession.

²⁰ Cf. Robbins Burling, *The Passage of Power: Studies in Political Succession*, Studies in Anthropology (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 99.

²¹ Ginny Brewer-Boydston, *Good Queen Mothers, Bad Queen Mothers: The Theological Presentation of the Queen Mother in 1 and 2 Kings* (CBQMS, 54; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2016), 2.

THE PASSAGE OF POWER IN TRIBAL AND EARLY MONARCHIC SOCIETIES

With the Hebrew Bible unforthcoming on explicit rules of royal succession and inheritance laws proving unhelpful, let us look beyond Israel. How has kingship been passed on in other cultures? The short answer: in all sorts of ways, and only rarely with primogeniture playing any serious role. Data from world history writ large emphatically backs this up. For example, the renowned anthropologist Jack Goody writes, “I want to stress that while, even in those systems we speak of as hereditary, some element of choice is always present, the extent of option varies greatly from next-in-line succession to ‘dynastic election’. And *despite the western idea that the automatic next-of-kin procedure is the normal type, dynastic election is in fact far more widespread.*”²² In fact, the next-in-line succession to which most Western scholars are accustomed is unquestionably the exception rather than the rule in monarchies. Although primogeniture became nearly ubiquitous in the monarchies of Europe in the nineteenth century, all sorts of laws—“customs” actually is probably a better word to use here than “laws,” because often dynasties accepted “house laws” that were more traditions than fixed rules—governed royal succession in various parts of the continent in the preceding millennium and more, from tanistry in Ireland to agnatic succession (among other systems) in England and France and elsewhere to elective monarchy in the Holy Roman Empire to the so-called law of fratricide in the Ottoman Empire, with much else in between.²³ Primogeniture is the exception, not the rule.

A brief survey will illustrate this. A few decades ago, Robbins Burling published *The Passage of Power: Studies in Political Succession*, which remains one of the most comprehensive works on the subject. He begins the study with a sampling of tribes in pre-colonial Africa. He does not encounter a single society in which

²² Goody, “Introduction,” 13, emphasis mine.

²³ For more on this point one can consult any history of European monarchies. I am partial to Evelyn Cecil, *Primogeniture: A Short History of Its Development in Various Countries and Its Practical Effects* (London: Murray, 1895), esp. 78–85, which presents a great deal of information with the flowery prose (and blanket judgmentalism) characteristic of nineteenth-century scholarship. For example, “Sweden was elective until 1544, when Gustavus Vasa so endeared himself to the subjects that they confirmed the succession in his family; and Bohemia, Hungary, and especially Poland, have at various times bestirred the cauldron of European history by the perilous vapours which the elective system generated, and to which it denied a safety-valve. The list cannot be closed without mentioning, in his temporal capacity, the Pope; and it is a matter of regret to have to recall, by way of emphasising the evils of an election system as opposed to a fixed rule of descent in an evil age, the trickery and corruption, and the wanton violence and ravages, that corroded a new election to the Holy See. It might have been hoped that the cloak of religion would have curbed some of the excesses which were perpetrated, but, alas! such a wish has too frequently in history betrayed a want of knowledge of human nature, and proved itself an idle dream” (83–84).

primogeniture governed the succession of top office. He pays specific attention to the succession protocols for the Swazi, the Bemba, the Nupe, and the Baganda, showing in each case a system based on heredity but with great flexibility and no strictly defined order of succession. He acknowledges that “the eldest may have the highest priority of all, but enough alternatives must be left open to allow a totally unfit man to be bypassed and to provide for the occasions when a monarch dies without issue.”²⁴

Burling then turns to the Marathas of sixteenth- to nineteenth-century India. Here he notes that while elder sons held a general precedence over younger sons (and over the previous ruler’s brothers), these priorities were far from absolute. The Marathas preferred to avoid crown princes so that no second-in-command would become too strong. They thus left “ambiguity in the genealogical rules for royal succession” to allow for various contenders (and which resulted in a conflict at nearly every succession).²⁵ In China, meanwhile, the Manchus had another system that allowed for any of several eligible candidates to assume the throne: “According to widely accepted Manchu custom, it was the members of the senior generation (the generation of the deceased ruler) who should gather in council and make the decision, but they had to appoint someone from the next lower generation as successor.”²⁶ During the Ming dynasty, on the other hand, primogeniture did in fact govern royal succession, but this is one of the few exceptions outside of late medieval Europe. Moreover, when the Manchus took power in the seventeenth century, this was immediately overturned. When the Manchus overthrew the Ming dynasty they established the Qing dynasty and changed things slightly, putting in place an appointive system in which the emperor designated his own heir (for more on this idea, see the following section).²⁷

We may add to these glimpses of Africa and Asia a few words about pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Ross Hassig describes the royal succession process among the Aztecs as consisting of a group of powerful players within the dynasty selecting a successor from among a group of eligible candidates: “Although Aztec royal succession was by direct royal descent, it was not dependent on birth order, so any of a number of male offspring might be selected to succeed.”²⁸ Hassig’s particular interpretation may overstate the role of royal wives, which is the focus of his study. Our lack of certainty in tracing the genealogy of Aztec dynastic history should caution us against firm declarations regarding the customs of Aztec royal succession.²⁹ But the

²⁴ Burling, *The Passage of Power*, 51–52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53–84, here 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 99–102.

²⁸ Ross Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), 30.

²⁹ Susan Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 10–12, describes the tremendous amount of inconsistency—often found within a single work—in the various annals of Aztec dynastic history, both in

available evidence does confirm that a pool of possible successors existed in any given situation and that birth order did not rigidly dictate the process.

In contemporary Inca society further south, primogeniture certainly played almost no role. The king's sons were all eligible for the throne, which led to frequent strife. The War of the Two Brothers, which rent the civilization and paved the way for Pizarro's conquest, demonstrates this point all too easily. Surveying royal succession among the Inca provides yet another stark contrast to the next-in-line succession systems often assumed by Western scholars: "In writing of ancient Peru, the chroniclers took for granted that in the New World the senior legitimate son of the monarch would inherit the throne as he did in Europe. As we study the chronicles and check the events following the death of each Inca, we discover that forms of royal inheritance were completely different."³⁰

While it would be possible to belabor this point with further examples, these glimpses into succession systems in Africa, Asia, and the Americas should suffice to prove Goody's statement that next-in-line succession systems are much rarer than dynastic systems that offer more flexibility. While heredity generally has dominated succession in societies throughout the world until the last few centuries,³¹ primogeniture specifically has not. Indeed,

the earliest Spanish accounts and in indigenous sources.

³⁰ Maria Rostworowski and Diez Canseco, "Succession, Coöption to the Kingship, and Royal Incest among the Inca," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 16/4 (1960), 417–27, here 417.

³¹ The two salient exceptions to this, of course, are ancient Greece and Rome, which were just that—exceptional. Burling notes that "Athenian democracy seems all the more miraculous when seen in worldwide terms rather than simply in European terms, for nowhere else at such an early date and nowhere else until many centuries later was heredity so completely overcome" (*The Passage of Power*, 123). Regarding Rome, in the context of this discussion one cannot help but think of the famous, albeit controversial, declaration by Philip Van Ness Myers, *Rome: Its Rise and Fall*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Ginn, 1902), 452, over a century ago: "Finally, among the political causes of the fall of Rome must be named the lack of a rule or principle of succession to the throne. The imperial crown, during the five centuries with which we have had to do, never became hereditary or regularly elective. Almost from first to last, as we have seen, the emperor generally reached the throne by irregular and violent means. The strength of the empire was wasted in constantly recurring wars of succession. Could a dynasty have been established in the first century, and had there grown up among the people a feeling of loyalty towards the imperial family, like that, for instance, of the Scotch to the House of Stuart, this sentiment would have given security and stability to the throne, and the history of the empire might have been wholly different from what it was." Of course, Rome is hardly exceptional in that the head of state "generally reached the throne by irregular and violent means"—this is probably more common than a peaceful, legitimate transfer of power in most of world history, and in much of the world even today. In this paper, however, I deal solely with the protocols of "regular," nonviolent succession.

as noted above, even in European monarchies where strict orders of succession have come to prevail, systems of primogeniture took a long time to take hold. The reasons for flexible succession systems are twofold and easy to grasp. On the one hand, history has repeatedly shown that powerful seconds-in-command tend to try to usurp power from the ruler. Even crown princes, who theoretically have some sort of filial piety and who stand to inherit the throne peacefully if they can simply be patient, frequently try to speed things along. One can see this even in the Court History of 2 Samuel, when Absalom (not necessarily a crown prince, but certainly an eligible candidate) gathered a following and revolted, nearly ousting David. Thus a certain level of ambiguity can help ensure the sovereign's safety. On the other hand and even more importantly, automatic next-in-line systems can, and given enough time inevitably will, bring dreadful rulers to the throne. While this might bring nothing more than embarrassment to a monarchy like modern England, most ancient civilizations were far less stable and more prone to collapse with insufficiently capable leadership.³² Burling summarizes, "If a rule of primogeniture could be made binding, then competition would be eliminated, but it is impossible to make such a rule completely inflexible since sooner or later it is likely to bring an utterly incompetent man to the throne. For this reason, *completely determinant succession systems hardly exist.*"³³

SUCCESSION PROTOCOLS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Having viewed patterns of succession macroscopically, I will now narrow the focus to the civilizations of the ancient Near East, investigating the places where Israel's neighbors afford glimpses into how the kingship passed from one to another. Considering the vast amount of texts these civilizations have left us, we have surprisingly little explicit evidence from the ancient Near East regarding how royal successors were chosen. In this section I survey some of the evidence that we do have. The sources I will look at cover a large swathe of the ancient Near East, including Hatti, the Levant, Assyria, and Persia.³⁴ Such

³² Of course, the counterweight to this is that royal succession governed by a firm principle of primogeniture greatly reduces instability following the death of a monarch. See, for example, Andrej Kokkonen and Anders Sundell, "Delivering Stability—Primogeniture and Autocratic Survival in European Monarchies 1000–1800," *American Political Science Review* 108/2 (2014), 438–53. They open the essay by quoting Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, book 3 chapter 6: "Men have preferred the risk of having children, monstrosities, or imbeciles as rulers to having disputes over the choice of good kings." Kokkonen and Sundell even go so far as to suggest that primogeniture systems by and large decrease the likelihood of a monarch coming to an untimely demise, but this goes against a wealth of (admittedly anecdotal) evidence.

³³ Burling, *The Passage of Power*, 51, emphasis mine.

³⁴ I omit discussion of Egypt from this survey, because I am less adept at working with Egyptian historical material myself and from my exploration into the subject it appears that surprisingly little work has

broad coverage is admittedly questionable; one must be careful not to cherry-pick the evidence from these diverse societies and treat the entire cultural sphere as a single, static entity. But the breadth has the advantage of allowing one to look at the entire *Kulturkreis* to identify overarching similarities that unite the societies within it. Through the survey I hope to demonstrate two points. First, the data we have suggests that, in accord with what we have come to expect from the previous section, primogeniture was not a governing principle of ancient Near Eastern royal succession. Birth order doubtless influenced the selection process at times, but not in an official way. Second, all the societies we will look at do share one underlying principle, namely, that before he died, the reigning king was expected to choose a successor from among his sons.

HATTI

The survey commences with the Hittites because they were the only ancient Near Eastern folks kind enough to leave behind a text furnishing explicit rules of royal succession. I refer to the Proclamation of Telipinu, who reigned near the end of the sixteenth century, straddling the Old and New Kingdoms of Hatti. §28 of the Proclamation states, “A son of the first rank (*ḫantez-ziyas*) only—let that son become king. If there is no first-rank son of the k[ing], then a son who is of the second tier (*tān*)

been done on royal succession in ancient Egypt. Kushite succession practices in the 25th Dynasty provide a salient exception to this, as a cottage industry has arisen debating whether fratrilineal or matrilineal succession replaced patrilineal succession during this period. On this, see Jean Revez, “The Role of the Kings’ Brothers in the Transmission of Royal Power in Ancient Egypt and Kush: A Cross-Cultural Study,” in Julie R. Anderson and Derek A. Welsby, eds., *The Fourth Cataract and Beyond: Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies*, (British Museum Publications of Egypt and Sudan, 1; Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 537–44, and the literature cited there. Given how fraught the scholarship is on this subject, I prefer not to draw any conclusions from what practices may or may not have occurred in the 25th Dynasty. With Egypt more generally, what remarks I do find from Egyptologists suggest that primogeniture may have played a role, but this seems to be based on the same assumptions that elicit these remarks among biblical scholars. For example, Dan’el Kahn writes, “Basically, the kingship in the Ancient Near East was regarded as hereditary through a patrilineal succession line, normally (but not always), according to the right of primogeniture. This was the case in the majority of Ancient Near Eastern Kingdoms: Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Elam, Hatti, Ugarit, Canaan (according to the El-Amarna tablets), Phoenicia, Israel (although the kingdom of Israel suffered from many *coups*), Judah, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Egypt, etc.” (“The Royal Succession in the 25th Dynasty,” *Mitteilungen der Sudanarchäologischen Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 16 [2005], 143–63, here 143). As will be clear from the following, however, I find that there is little to support the idea that primogeniture governed succession in any of these societies, and in a few cases we have evidence that militates against this idea. I would like to thank Dan’el Kahn and Maggie Bryson for discussing Egyptian succession practices with me as I prepared this.

pēdaš)—let that one become king. When there is no male child of the king, then she who is a first-rank daughter (DUMU.MUNUS *hantezziš*)—let them take a bridegroom (*antiyantān*) for her (and) let that one become king.” Many aspects of this well-known edict continue to be debated, including whether Telipinu was here issuing a (prescriptive) reform or simply (descriptively) codifying existing practice, what rules governed succession prior to this,³⁵ and what exactly constitutes the “first rank” and “second tier” of the royal family. Only the latter need concern us during the present examination, and even it is of little consequence with regard to its precise nuances.

Most notable here is that while Telipinu explicitly affirms a single dynastic line, he makes no reference to birth order. Rather, the only stipulation is that all “first-rank” sons have an equal claim, thus there may often be a pool of eligible candidates. I suspect that “first rank” refers to the queen who bore the child,³⁶ but even if this is incorrect, the wording of the Proclamation all but ensures that official procedure allows for multiple parties to be chosen, unlike a system based on primogeniture in which there is a clearly established order of individuals with the right to assume the throne. The Proclamation does not specify how one candidate is selected, but other texts suggest that naming a successor is the responsibility of the incumbent king. For example, in a vassal treaty, Suppiluliuma I states, “Now you, Ḫuqqana, recognize only My Majesty in regard to lordship! My son of whom I, My Majesty, say: ‘Let everyone recognize this one,’ and whom I thereby distinguish among (his brothers)—you, Ḫuqqana, recognize him!”³⁷

³⁵ Various proposals have been put forward regarding Old Kingdom succession policies, including the ideas that it was elective, patrilineal, matrilineal, and avunculate. I concur with Forlanini that the system was basically patrilineal, but that the line of succession was constantly interfered with as different branches of the royal family jockeyed for power via political marriages and adoptions; see Massimo Forlanini, “An Attempt at Reconstructing the Branches of the Hittite Royal Family of the Early Kingdom Period,” in Yoram Cohen, Amir Gilan, and Jared L. Miller, eds., *Pax Hethitica: Studies on the Hittites and Their Neighbors in Honour of Itamar Singer* (StBoT, 51; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 115–35. I submit that the purpose of the edict was to curtail this conniving and consolidate power within a single branch of the royal family.

³⁶ If this is correct, it could point to a similarity with Judah. As noted above, queen mothers are frequently named in 1–2 Kings, possibly because the position of the individual woman reinforced the legitimacy of the successor.

³⁷ KBo 5.3 i 8–11. Translation following Gary M. Beckman, “Inheritance and Royal Succession among the Hittites,” in Harry A. Hoffner Jr. and Gary M. Beckman, eds., *Kaniššumar: A Tribute to Hans G. Güterbock on His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (AS, 23; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1986), 13–31, here 18. Beckman also cites another treaty of Suppiluliuma in which he instructs his vassal, “Whichever son of his My Majesty speaks of to Šunaššura for kingship, Šunaššura will guard that one” (19).

In sum, the evidence from Hatti in the latter half of the second millennium points to a system in which the incumbent king selected and presented a successor from a pool of eligible candidates—the pool was clearly delimited, with only as many possibilities as “first-rank” sons that the king could sire, and as few as zero, in which case the kingdom had to turn to a second level on the hierarchy of eligibility (also with multiple possible candidates). Gary Beckman concluded the same three decades ago, writing that “inheritance of the office of the king . . . was subject to the will of the previous holder as to its disposition within the group of eligibles.”³⁸ This will prove to be the case with the other societies to be looked at as well, beginning with the roughly contemporary society of Ugarit.

UGARIT

Traveling southward, we see a very different type of evidence for a very similar type of succession system. While the texts unearthed at Ras Shamra offer little by which to reconstruct the goings-on in the palace at Ugarit, the well-known Baal Cycle offers a possible clue to the protocol for a new king assuming the throne. Wayne Pitard convincingly demonstrates that “the importance of recognizing the authority of the elder king in establishing the legitimacy of the younger co-regent and the proper protocol necessary in this circumstance . . . overwhelm everything else in the episode and must be the overriding concern of the storyteller.”³⁹ He points out that while scholars have tended to draw parallels primarily between the Baal Cycle and Enuma Elish, the account of Baal’s assumption of the throne more closely resembles the biblical succession story of Solomon in 1 Kings 1: “Here,” he writes, “we have a story of royal succession rather than an existential crisis of the gods.”⁴⁰

In the Baal Cycle, the elder god, El, appoints Yamm, a member of the younger generation of gods, as his coregent—and, therefore, heir apparent (if not crown prince). The divine council ratifies this decision, but when Yamm proves himself unworthy through an arrogant breach of protocol, his nemesis, Baal, begins angling for the throne. A major theme of the story is how Baal, without breaching court etiquette, convinces El to appoint him coregent in place of Yamm. Pitard points out that “for Ba’al to take his position [as coregent], it is imperative that he have the approval of El, the king, who has not yet so proclaimed.”⁴¹ The peculiarly long narrative about Baal’s attempt to gain El’s permission to build himself a palace reinforces this

³⁸ Beckman, “Inheritance and Royal Succession among the Hittites,” 19.

³⁹ Wayne T. Pitard, “The Combat Myth as a Succession Story at Ugarit,” in JoAnn Scurlock and Richard H. Beal, eds., *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel’s Chaostkampf Hypothesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 199–205, here 204.

⁴⁰ Pitard, “The Combat Myth as a Succession Story at Ugarit,” 202.

⁴¹ Pitard, “The Combat Myth as a Succession Story at Ugarit,” 204.

point: by permitting Baal to build a palace, El publicly acknowledges Baal's position as coregent and successor.

If Pitard is correct, as I believe he is, this myth could have interesting ramifications for our understanding of royal succession practices in Ugarit. On the one hand, we cannot blithely assume that the composers of this myth imputed the rules governing human society to the divine, but on the other, it is reasonable that when pondering the transition of power among the gods, the people would draw conclusions from what they knew and witnessed in their own lives. Given the prominence of the passage of power in this myth, it is even possible that the method of royal succession was important enough at Ugarit that one of the *Urmyths* of the ancient Near East was modified in a manner to highlight this idea by extrapolating the human sphere onto the divine. And the protocol for succession that the Baal Cycle reflects is that of an elder king declaring a successor—and, in this case, a coregent who would take over many of the active duties of kingship while the incumbent still lives. Clearly, El could have selected any of numerous possible candidates, any of whom could, pending the approval of the council, step into the position of coregent and heir apparent. This situation resembles that seen in the contemporaneous Hittite culture and coheres well with ancient Near Eastern civilizations of the first millennium, to which we now turn.

THE LEVANT

Two West Semitic inscriptions merit mention here due to their geographical and chronological proximity to early Israel, though the data they provide is less clear than the rest discussed in this section. Kilamuwa opens the curse section of his inscription from the late ninth century by stating, “Now whoever of my sons who will sit (reign) in my place and damages this inscription . . .”⁴² Similarly, in the following century Panamuwa opens his invocation of future generations with, “Whoever of my house seizes the scepter in Y'dy and sits on my throne and reig[ns in my place] . . .”⁴³ One could interpret the generalities with which Kilamuwa and Panamuwa discuss the future rulers to mean that they were uncertain who would succeed them. It is equally plausible, however, that the inscriptions include such generalities because the rulers were addressing multiple future generations and therefore could not be more specific. Indeed,

⁴² *wmy . bbu/y 'š . yšb . thtn . nyzq . bspr z* (lines 13–14). This translation follows K. Lawson Younger Jr., “The Kulamuwa Inscription,” *COS* 2.148; transliteration follows Heather Dana Davis Parker, “The Levant Comes of Age: The Ninth Century BCE through Script Traditions,” PhD diss. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 73.

⁴³ *mnmn [.] bny / y'hw . htr . by'dy] . nyšb . 'l . mšby . nym[k . thtn]* (lines 24–25; cf. also line 20). This translation follows K. Lawson Younger Jr., “The Hadad Inscription,” *COS* 2.157; transliteration follows *KAI* #214. Younger apparently reads *bty* (“my house”) in line 24 rather than *bny* (“my sons”); *KAI* reads the pertinent /n/ as questionable.

Panamuwa's text appears to be an end-of-life memorial inscription: "I am Panamuwa, son of Qarli, king of Y'dy, who have erected this statue for Hadad in my eternal abode (i.e. 'burial chamber')." ⁴⁴ If the kings had anything to do with determining their successors, Panamuwa surely would have weighed in by that stage of his career. With this in mind, it is unwise to place too much emphasis on this evidence.

One could also mention here the brief notice in 2 Kgs 3:27 about Mesha, the ninth-century Moabite king. The narrator reports that when the Israelite-Judahite coalition was prevailing against Moab, Mesha "took his *bəkor* son, who was to rule after him, and he sacrificed him as a burnt offering upon the wall" (ויקח את-בנו הבכור אשר-ימלך תחתיו ויעלהו עלה על-החמה). Scholars have traditionally read "his firstborn (*bəkor*) son, who was to rule after him" as redundant, emphasizing the importance of Mesha's son in a manner not unlike the description of Isaac in Gen 22:2. It is possible, however, that while the mention of Mesha's son being marked for succession was indeed to emphasize the worthiness of this sacrifice, this is not redundant with the remark about his precedence in birth order but a further explanation of the doomed offspring's significance. But now we move on to firmer evidence from elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

ASSYRIA

Not much can be said about succession practices in the Old, Middle, or even early Neo-Assyrian periods, but when we move to the Sargonids we encounter some interesting, albeit anecdotal, evidence. Despite the abundance of textual sources documenting this period, we know little about the first few successions, but we can confidently reconstruct two crucial details about Esarhaddon's assumption of the throne of Sennacherib upon the latter's death in 681. First, Esarhaddon was a younger son of Sennacherib, and at least some of his elder brothers were alive at the time of his accession. In addition to the name Esarhaddon, *Ašur-aḥu-iddina*, meaning "Ashur has provided a brother," Esarhaddon opens his account of the accession by stating, "Of my elder brothers, their youngest brother am I," ⁴⁵ and he describes how these brothers "raved," "schemed evil," "rebelled," and "constantly butted heads . . . like goats" in order to attain the kingship. ⁴⁶ Second, prior to his untimely demise Sennacherib declared Esarhaddon his successor. We can establish this by coordinating two pieces of evidence, a vassal treaty of Sennacherib that is quite fragmentary but appears to mention his nomination of a successor ⁴⁷—although the appointee's name is unfortunately missing—and an Esarhaddon inscription, Nineveh J,

⁴⁴ Younger, "The Hadad Inscription," *COS* 2.156.

⁴⁵ Nineveh A i 8.

⁴⁶ Nineveh A i 41-44.

⁴⁷ For this text, see Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (SAA, 2; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 18 #3.

which refers to him as “great prince of the House of Succession,” using the official Assyrian crown prince formula.⁴⁸ It is difficult to say more than this—we cannot pinpoint when Sennacherib declared Esarhaddon his successor, though many suggest it happened not long before his assassination;⁴⁹ neither do we know whether Esarhaddon’s nomination superseded a previously established arrangement for the succession.⁵⁰ But the basic facts do indicate that Sennacherib elevated Esarhaddon over his elder brothers by placing him in line for the kingship of Assyria.

We witness a similar action a generation later, with Esarhaddon the designator rather than the designatee. This case is better documented—Weissert notes that “there is hardly any period in Mesopotamian history so well documented as the four years antedating Assurbanipal’s accession to the throne.”⁵¹ One might protest that the excessive amount of documentation—and numerous demands that everyone under Assyrian rule accept Esarhaddon’s decision—suggest that such a maneuver required ideological support to succeed. I would argue, on the contrary, that our knowledge of this succession is a coincidence of a period in Assyrian history for which we have a wealth of textual data of all sorts. Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal are two of the best documented ancient Near Eastern rulers, which makes it likelier still that these successions, rather than being outliers, were representative. We are less confident about successions at other times not because they were more stable but because we have fewer sources.

⁴⁸ *mār šarri rabû ša bīt riḏūti*. See Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)* (Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period, 4; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 61 Esarhaddon 13 line 1. Theodore Kwasman and Simo Parpola, *Legal Transactions of the Royal Court of Nineveh, Part I: Tiglath-pileser III through Esarhaddon* (SAA, 6; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1991), XXVII, argue that *mār šarri* alone (lit. “son of the king”) means “crown prince” specifically. I do not accept this for multiple reasons; rather, I expect that the reference to the prince being in the House of Succession is precisely to distinguish the crown prince from any other prince (*mār šarri*). See Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, 305 n. 12.

⁴⁹ Eckart Frahm, for example, dates the appointment of Esarhaddon to “683 or slightly earlier” (“Sīn-ahḫē-erība,” in Heather D. Baker, ed., *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. 3, part 1: P–Š [Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2002], 1113–27, here 1121). Frahm may well be correct but it seems still uncertain; cf. Kwasman and Parpola, *Legal Transactions of the Royal Court of Nineveh, Part I*, XXXIV.

⁵⁰ Numerous scholars have asserted that Esarhaddon’s elder brother Urad-Mullissu previously held the position of crown prince and that Sennacherib snubbed him by promoting Esarhaddon over him, but there is simply no evidence for this. Similarly, we do not know whether Sennacherib’s eldest son, Aššur-nādin-šumi, who presumably died at the hands of the Elamites, ever held the title of crown prince. I suspect that he did not; see Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, 302 n. 2.

⁵¹ E. Weissert, “Aššūr-bāni-apli,” in Karen Radner, ed., *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. 1, part 1: A (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1998), 159–71, here 160.

In any event, when it came time to arrange for his own succession, Esarhaddon also nominated a younger son, Ashurbanipal, over at least one and perhaps two elder brothers.⁵² This move is amply attested—so the facts are easily laid out. On 12 Ayaru 672, Esarhaddon appointed Ashurbanipal “great prince of the House of Succession of Assyria” (*mār šarri rabū ša bīt ridūti ša Aššur*⁵³). Again, however, we cannot determine what motivated either the choosing of Ashurbanipal or the timing of the announcement. Scholars have posited Esarhaddon’s failing health, the recent death of Ashurbanipal’s beloved mother Ešarra-ḥammāt, the Assyrian setback in Egypt a year earlier, the apparent demise of Esarhaddon’s firstborn son Sîn-nādin-apli, and other factors as having played a role. That the selection did not derive from any ill will of Esarhaddon toward his eldest (living) son, Šamaš-šumu-ukīn, is discernible from the fact that the latter was simultaneously designated “prince of the House of Succession [of] Babylon” (*mār šarri ša bīt ridūti [ša] Babilī*⁵⁴). For our purposes, it merits mention that although Esarhaddon’s firstborn, Sîn-nādin-apli, did hold the position of crown prince during his life, even he did not automatically receive this title on account of birth order. A query to Šamaš exists in which Esarhaddon requested via oracle an answer to whether he should install Sîn-nādin-apli in the House of Succession;⁵⁵ it appears that the public designation of Sîn-nādin-apli as successor occurred only after an affirmative response.

In sum, this anecdotal evidence from Neo-Assyria paints a picture not unlike that seen in Hatti and Ugarit: the king named a successor from among his sons at his discretion, with no obvious preference for the eldest.⁵⁶ I will conclude by glancing at one

⁵² For a possible brother between Šamaš-šumu-ukīn and Ashurbanipal, see Weissert, “Aššūr-bāni-apli,” 162; also H. D. Baker and P. Gentili, “Šamaš-mētu-uballit,” in Heather D. Baker, ed., *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. 3, part 2: Š–Z (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2011), 1205.

⁵³ Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, 58 #6 line 667 and *passim* in the succession treaty (often “great prince of the House of Succession, son of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria,” e.g., line 43).

⁵⁴ Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, 58 #6 line 669, cf. also lines 86–87.

⁵⁵ Ivan Starr, *Queries to the Sun god: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria* (SAA, 4; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1990), 160–61 #149.

⁵⁶ One might offer two objections to my suggestion that there was no preference for the firstborn, neither of which I find convincing. First, a number of scholars would argue that although both Sennacherib and Esarhaddon eventually named younger sons as crown prince, both of these figures initially supported their firstborn (both of these firstborns, Aššūr-nādin-šumi and Sîn-nādin-apli, apparently failed to outlive their fathers). I do not accept this. It is true that Esarhaddon supported his firstborn, but I doubt that Sennacherib ever intended for Aššūr-nādin-šumi to take the throne of Assyria. There is no mention of him ever entering the House of Succession, and although later Per-

final civilization that offers additional support for this means of selecting a successor.

PERSIA

The relatively short-lived Neo-Babylonian Empire saw its share of coups and usurpations, but left us few details with which to determine how proper successions were meant to take place. But the evidence from Persia seems to be fairly clear. Already forty years ago, Richard Frye concluded, “Succession thus did not seem to follow any law in ancient Iran, but rather it was the prerogative of the reigning monarch to name his successor.”⁵⁷

The two centuries of Persian rule were rife with fascinating, contested successions, each worthy of investigation in its own right. It must suffice here to examine Xerxes’s assumption of the throne of Darius in 486. Here we must weigh Xerxes’s own laconic description of being named crown prince against Herodotus’s more complete, but also more dubious, account. The former simply informs us that “Darius had other sons also, (but) thus was the desire of Ahuramazda: Darius, my father, made me the greatest after himself.”⁵⁸ Herodotus, meanwhile, records that Darius’s sons disputed among themselves who was first in line for the kingship. Darius had three sons by the daughter of

sian rulers would place their sons on the throne of Babylon as a precursor to ruling Persia, we have no reason to believe that the Assyrian monarchs considered this idea (see especially Esarhaddon’s succession arrangements). Moreover, Sennacherib was an older ruler, becoming king at over the age of 40 (he was born around 745; see Frahm, “Sīn-ahḫē-erība,” 1116). He may have wanted a younger son of his to succeed him so that his successor would be more in his prime.

Second, when Esarhaddon designated Ashurbanipal as his successor, Adad-šumu-ušur, the chief exorcist, wrote a letter to him including the following excerpt: “What has not been done in heaven, the king, my lord, has done upon earth and shown us: you have girded a son of yours with headband and entrusted to him the kingship of Assyria; your eldest son you have set to the kingship in Babylon. You have placed the first on your right, the second on your left side!” (translation follows Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* [SAA, X; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014], 152 #185 lines 5–12). Some have interpreted this as a chastisement of the king for breaching protocol, which ignores the adulatory nature of the entire correspondence. For example, the immediately following lines read, “(When) we saw (this), we blessed the king, our lord, and our hearts were delighted” (13–15). If Adad-šumu-ušur’s flabbergastedness derives solely from Esarhaddon’s nomination of a younger son, he must have had a short memory, given that Esarhaddon himself became king on account of a similar situation. I suspect that he expresses amazement at the scenario at its entirety, by splitting up the two kingships between the brothers. The letter is also entirely obsequious, so this may be an exaggeration of Esarhaddon’s innovativeness.

⁵⁷ R. N. Frye, “Remarks on Kingship in Ancient Iran,” *Acta Antiqua* 25 (1977), 75–82, here 81.

⁵⁸ XPf §4, translation following Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 2007), 244.

Gobryas, and the eldest of these (and his eldest son overall), Artobazanes, considered himself the heir apparent owing to his status as firstborn. Xerxes, meanwhile, was the eldest of four sons born to Darius by his second wife, Atossa, and was the first son born in the purple to Darius. Although both of these sons appealed to birth order in some way to legitimize themselves, according to Herodotus's account the sons' senior status was only a means by which to persuade their father to designate them as crown prince. He writes, "according to the Persian custom, the King always appointed his successor before marching out to war."⁵⁹

There is no evidence to support Herodotus's claim of this Persian "custom" (*nomos*),⁶⁰ but the implications for the role of the incumbent king in selecting his successor still hold. Briant asserts that during the Achaemenid period, "the only bulwark against the threat of a family coup d'état was the proclamation of a crown prince," for "the Persian kingdom was not a constitutional monarchy with continuity determined by written rules of succession that strictly applied by a sort of Supreme Court."⁶¹ In the absence of such rules, royal fiat could dictate the succession, but little else—and, of course, even royal prerogative was subject to the successor having the capacity to overcome all those willing to contest the succession with force or conspiracy.⁶²

Summing up Xerxes's case, Briant declares that "the exclusion of Artobazanes, the arguments exchanged, and the frequently attested intervention of the court cabal in favor of one or another competitor [for the throne] seem to confirm that there was no fixed rule [of succession] and that the preference for the oldest son . . . related more to incidental conditions than to mandatory rules."⁶³ Indeed, "in every case, the king's choice remained entirely free."⁶⁴ In Persia, therefore, we again see succession dictated primarily by the king's choice and only tangentially affected by the birth order of the royal offspring.

SUMMARY

The preceding survey has shown that texts from second-millennium Hatti and Ugarit, and first-millennium Assyria and Persia,

⁵⁹ Herodotus, 7.2.1, translation following *The Landmark Herodotus*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Anchor, 2007), 493.

⁶⁰ See Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 519–20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 777–78.

⁶² Briant (*ibid.*, 520–22) discusses whether a principle of primogeniture did guide Persian succession. He acknowledges that the firstborn was most likely to succeed to the throne and that "the preference given the oldest is confirmed statistically" (521). But he suspects that this was because such preference is natural, not because of any law dictating firstborn succession.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 522.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

suggest certain similarities in the way these civilizations handled royal succession. In each society, the reigning king was expected to designate a successor from a group of eligible princes. Although the eldest son often succeeded, this was far from a given, and a great amount of evidence militates against the idea that primogeniture had any official role in determining the order of succession. I encourage caution—I do not want to homogenize the entirety of the ancient Near East, and though I have emphasized the commonalities among the societies examined, differences also appear: for example, the evidence from Ugarit suggests that coregency was commonplace; we do not see this elsewhere. In Assyria, the crown prince seems to have been confirmed by his residence in the House of Succession, a practice not attested elsewhere. Moreover, we have no evidence for *when* a king was expected to nominate a successor; we do not know whether this was dictated by age, circumstance, or simply royal prerogative. But it does appear that the conclusions drawn by anthropologists studying civilizations throughout the world apply to the ancient Near East as well—primogeniture did not govern royal succession in any official sense. Moreover, we can take one step beyond this and tentatively suggest that within this cultural sphere the accepted practice was for a king to name his successor while still in control of both the realm and his faculties. With this in mind, we now return to the Succession Narrative, where we left Solomon looking distinctly illegitimate in the middle of his own propaganda.

THE SUCCESSION NARRATIVE IN LIGHT OF ROYAL SUCCESSION PRACTICES NEAR AND FAR

Of course, we cannot assume that just because the evidence indicates a common pattern of royal succession in other ancient Near Eastern realms, it automatically applied in early Israel. I interpret 1 Kgs 1–2 as providing an authentic view into the events of the tenth century—that is, that the account we read derives from traditions that date to this period. This view comes with caveats, of course: first, although like most interpreters, I read these two chapters as an integrated unit, there are clearly a few later additions, mostly Deuteronomistic in character. Second, I make no claim about when the traditions were written; I am content to leave the debate about scribalism in tenth-century Israel to others. Third, dating the stories to a contemporary source does not imply any assessment of the particular historical claims. From its inception, this text had an agenda. But the transparency of this agenda—to justify Solomon’s actions upon taking the throne, particularly how he dispensed with his opponents—seems to have had the most currency during or close to his reign, which leads me to an early date.⁶⁵ To begin with, David’s reign came early in the state development of Israel (using this term as

⁶⁵ For my discussion of the date of the text, see Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, 275–76; for a source-critical breakdown of the text, 252–57.

generically as possible, or Judah), just when the polity was emerging from whatever one wants to call its premonarchic form.

If this assessment is correct and the text does reflect events in the tenth century, even using the language of kingship in this context is debatable. David and Solomon were closer to sheikhs overseeing a confederation of tribes than kings as are typically envisioned by Westerners.⁶⁶ In any event, the polity David ruled certainly had not developed anywhere near as fully as Assyria or Persia, so we must exercise caution in translating the customs of these societies to Israel. Moreover, one can only speculate on to what extent ideas from civilizations like Hatti and Ugarit would have filtered into the Judean highlands at this time, and even if they had, we should not strip Israel of all its *Eigenbegrifflichkeit*. But even if one does not accept that the entire ancient Near Eastern cultural sphere subscribed to a common basic pattern of succession, or that Israel was sufficiently part of this circle at this point to have the pattern apply, surveying the surrounding nations does illustrate the fundamental idea that in the ancient Near East, as elsewhere in the world, primogeniture is the exception rather than the rule in royal succession. There is little reason to think that this custom guided royal succession in early Israel in any formal capacity.

This is not, however, to deny that birth order played any role at all. On the contrary, some general preference for the firstborn seems common to all sorts of cultures, and although it is difficult to evaluate to what extent this was the case in ancient Israel (see the discussion of *bəḵōr* above), one should not dismiss *tout court* the notion that eldest sons lacked any advantages derived from their seniority. In the survey above, two elder brothers (Urad-Mullissu and Artobazanes) contested their father's choice and considered themselves better candidates on account of birth order. The account in 1 Kings bears this out as well when Solomon, following the Abishag incident, chastises his mother saying, "Ask for [Adonijah] the kingdom also, for he is my elder brother" (2:22)—acknowledging that Adonijah's status as elder brother gave him an advantage in the struggle for the throne. To this could be added the note in 2 Chronicles that Jehoshaphat gave his various sons many gifts, "but the kingdom he gave to Jehoram, for he was *bəḵōr*" (21:3). This latter record may appear at first glance to support the idea of primogeniture's official role in royal succession, but in fact it militates against it. Jehoshaphat "gave" (*nātan*) the kingdom to Jehoram; the narrator states that he preferred Jehoram because of his firstborn status, but the kingship was available for Jehoshaphat to give to whomever he chose.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, 244 n. 134. Having said that, there is increasing acknowledgment that some societies, especially those with (semi-)nomadic elements, may have been far more complex than many scholars of state formation often allow in the absence of significant archeological remains. See, for example, Erez Ben-Yosef, "The Architectural Bias in Current Biblical Archaeology," *V/T* 69 (2019), 361–87.

⁶⁷ Cf. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 75. This becomes

On the whole, then, it seems that Adonijah may have been the most natural choice for successor, but no custom or institution made this inevitable. I suspect that the reason Adonijah appears as heir apparent in such a large proportion of the secondary literature is solely because of the stranglehold that primogeniture has on Western conceptions of monarchy.⁶⁸

If we view Adonijah and Solomon as equally viable candidates at the outset of the text, it colors the entire narrative. To begin with, it resolves the problem mentioned in the introduction—that if Adonijah had a legitimate claim to the throne, Solomon is a usurper. Unlike other well-known examples of the unworthy predecessor, such as Urhi-Tessup in Hattusili's Autobiography, Saul in the David narrative, or Nabonidus in the Cyrus Cylinder, Adonijah committed no act of treason or impiety to disqualify himself from office. Many commentators begrudgingly admit that Adonijah's actions were justified.⁶⁹ But seeing Solomon and Adonijah as equally viable rivals going into the affair changes this. In such a reading Adonijah's actions are still not necessarily treasonous—this depends on whether one thinks he acted improperly because his father was still alive, and on the nuance of the verb *mitnaššé*, he “exalted himself”—but it presents Adonijah as just one option, and an obviously poor one in light of his similarities to Absalom. It simultaneously justifies the actions of the Solomon faction, which does in fact seek to gain kingship through an appropriate means, David's imprimatur, even if the circumstances are dubious. Seeing the two candidates on equal footing also highlights Solomon's passivity in contrast to Adonijah's grasping for power.⁷⁰ The extant apologies from

clearer still in light of 2 Chr 11:18–23, which reports that Rehoboam loved Maacah more than all his other wives, “so Rehoboam appointed Abijah son of Maacah chief, as prince among his brothers, so as to make him king” (ויעמד לראש רחבעם את־אביה בן־מעכה לנגיד באחיו כי) (להמליכו, 2 Chr 11:22). The text is not explicit that Abijah was a younger son, but it implies that Jewish son of Mahalath, Rehoboam's first wife, was eldest.

⁶⁸ As an aside, this point was recently reinforced while watching *The Lion King* with my daughter. As Scar exiled young Simba, I couldn't stop thinking how preposterous it was that a pride of lions would determine leadership like British royals. I consider something like the law of fratricide far more likely there. My daughter was unbothered by the anachronism.

⁶⁹ For example, Burke O. Long, *1 Kings* (FOTL, 9; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 37, writes, “The narrator also weaves into this fabric some comments (vv. 6, 8, 10) to suggest the essential problem of the whole affair. For Adonijah's actions have a certain justification.” See also Ryken, *1 Kings*, 9.

⁷⁰ The idea that lack of desire for power is a requirement, or at least an advantage, for wielding power correctly seems to be a nearly universal idea. One is reminded of the exchange between the young prince and Aslan in C. S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian*: “Welcome, Prince,” said Aslan. “Do you feel yourself sufficient to take up the Kingship of Narnia?” “I—I don't think I do, Sir,” said Caspian. “I am only a kid.” “Good,” said Aslan. “If you had felt yourself sufficient, it would have been proof that you were not.”

the ancient Near East make it clear that lust for power was considered a flaw in would-be rulers.⁷¹

Beyond this, reading the Succession Narrative as a contest between two equally viable candidates has other interpretive consequences, some of which clear up other ambiguities of the traditional reading. I will conclude with three examples of this.

1. First, the full nuance of *'ānī 'emlōk* "I will be king" (1 Kgs 1:5), with the use of the emphatic pronoun "I," becomes more apparent. Had Adonijah been simply acceding to the throne as expected, a simple *'emlōk* would suffice. But here we see that Adonijah is distinguishing himself from the other potential candidates: "I—not someone else—will be king." This still does not necessarily condemn Adonijah's actions, but it explains his need to take action.
2. Second, the statement that Adonijah "exalted himself" (*mitnaśśē'*, 1 Kgs 1:5) becomes clearer. Nearly all scholars read the term as pejorative, despite the fact that it has no inherently positive or negative character⁷² and does not indicate any obvious impropriety on Adonijah's part. But if Adonijah were not the established crown prince, it supports those who read this as suggesting his arrogance. For example, Marvin Sweeney writes, "The narrative presents Adonijah as the self-presumed heir who acts rashly to claim his father's throne. . . The text emphasizes Adonijah's presumptuous character."⁷³ This is part and parcel of the characterization of Adonijah as grasping for power, discussed briefly above.
3. Third, although it would still be useful to have more background to the conflict, viewing all of David's sons as equally plausible contenders to the throne allows us to posit an explanation for why Solomon alone of the princes was not invited to Adonijah's feast.⁷⁴ If Adon-

⁷¹ See Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, 54.

⁷² *ns'* appears eleven times in the Hithpael in the Hebrew Bible (see HALOT 1.727), usually in neutral situations.

⁷³ Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 54. He continues, "The first statement of [Adonijah's] actions employs the verb *mitnaśśē'*, 'promoted/raised himself,' to portray Adonijah's claim to kingship; there is no indication that he has any specific reason to believe that he is the one to succeed David. His claim also employs an emphatic and otherwise unnecessary pronoun, *'ānī 'emlōk*, 'I will be king,' as opposed to simply *'emlōk*, 'I will be king,' which stresses his own volition." Note, though, that Sweeney suggests that Adonijah's behavior is rash and presumptuous on the basis of a literary reading of Kings, which in turn suggests that it is Yahweh who appoints a successor. This seems to me to miss the tone of 1 Kings 1–2, which is more concerned with *Realpolitik* than theology.

⁷⁴ One common explanation for this is that there were two factions among David's sons, consisting of those born in Hebron and those born in Jerusalem, respectively. This is a possibility, but there is no ev-

ijah's status as crown prince, the only legitimate successor, were universally recognized, he would have had no reason to single out Solomon as an opponent. But if the succession were widely recognized to be up in the air, one must assume that the more ambitious of the princes would have begun planning well before the death of the king. As the two rivals developed their bases of support,⁷⁵ each would certainly have caught wind of the other's machinations, drawing the battle lines in advance.⁷⁶ This could also explain why, when Adonijah acted (prematurely?), Solomon's supporters leaped into action with an alternative strategy, claiming royal imprimatur—the generally accepted means of establishing a legitimate successor. This is of course speculative, but it is entirely feasible and seems likelier than any scenario one can reconstruct in which Adonijah was widely recognized as the successor.

CONCLUSION

In sum, most biblical scholars approach royal succession in Israel and Judah as if the process were governed by the principle of primogeniture. Surveying succession practices elsewhere in the ancient Near East, however, as well as succession practices in other autocracies, shows this to be an anachronistic imposition of cultural practices with which we are familiar onto the ancient world. I contend that it is more likely that the default principle of royal succession in Israel was that all princes were equally viable, and that if there were any established means of signalling a single legitimate successor in the nascent state in the time of David, it involved the designation of the incumbent king. Reading the conflict between Adonijah and Solomon in light of this changes the tone of the passage. Rather than searching the text in vain for some pretext by which to delegitimize Adonijah and justify Solomon's coup, the interpreter can take the text as is, presenting a fair rivalry for the throne between one ambitious, overweening candidate and another passive, unassuming candidate.

idence for it, and it fails to explain why, according to the narrative, Solomon alone of David's sons was singled out as an enemy by Adonijah.

⁷⁵ Alternatively, it is plausible that Solomon really was passive, the object of others' scheming. If there were preexisting rivalries between Joab and Benaiah, or Zadok and Abiathar, it is conceivable that those who were not invited to Adonijah's side then banded together and searched for a viable candidate to support.

⁷⁶ One can point to several other situations in history where, as an elder monarch lingered on in life, various factions planned and waited, only to leap into action at the ruler's eventual passing. From the ancient Near East, one thinks of the situation at the death of Sennacherib, where—despite his public designation of a successor—his sons clearly prepared for a battle for the throne after his demise. See Andrew Knapp, "The Murderer of Sennacherib, yet Again: The Case against Esarhaddon," *JAO* 140 (2020), 165–81, here 174–76.