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The Ideology of Brotherhood

With its unmistakable suggestion of domination, the ‘protection’ metaphor, even if reciprocal and multi-directional, is best reserved for unequal relationships: those between a great and a small king, or between a king and his officials. Where peer relations are concerned, it is much better to employ another metaphor, also springing from family and small group relationships, namely, the metaphor of ‘brotherhood’ (ahhûtu). The legal procedure of ‘adoption in brotherhood’ was so common in the Late Bronze age that the metaphor had no problem in being perfectly understood and widely accepted. ‘Brotherhood’ is a conventional relationship, but it has the same force and meaning as one of blood. It is therefore one that is perfectly convenient for the expression of a political alliance between peers, emphasizing (in comparison to other more technical terms) the personal and voluntary involvement of the partners. Moreover, intermarriage between royal families was intensive enough to supply a further incentive and justification for using the metaphor. Many kings were in fact linked by brother-in-law relationships, and many more were always involved in negotiations with this end in view: ‘Are you not looking for brotherhood and good relations, in order to keep closer each other, when you write to me about marriage? And I, just for that, for brotherhood and good relations, in order to keep closer each other, I write to you about marriage.’

The cumulative effect of intermarriage and conventional brotherhood is the ground for considering all the royal houses as belonging to a unique extended family in an international setting. The class feeling, the consciousness of the homologous structure of the political hierarchy in every kingdom, produce a horizontal solidarity no less important than the vertical ‘national’ solidarity which is sharply fractured by the basic distinction between lords and servants.
Kings exchanging correspondence call each other ‘brother’ or less frequently ‘colleague’, and define their alliance as a ‘brotherhood’, a ‘goodness (of relations)’ (ṭābūtu), even a ‘friendship’ or ‘love’ (raʾamūtu). They insist on the idea of ‘loving’ each other, ‘enjoying’ and ‘not afflicting’ each other’s heart, sharing resources and gratifying each other’s desires.

If a difference in age should make the brotherhood metaphor inappropriate, the image of a father/son relationship is used instead; this is just a sign of personal respect with no political implications. When the royal Ugaritic couple address a high Hittite official as ‘father’, they are not implying any political subordination; they just wish to honour an old man. The use of the term ‘son’ as a form of address is also devoid of political significance, though it savours of an irritating ‘paternalism’.

When a Hittite official addresses a young and recently enthroned Ugaritic king as his ‘son’, his object is to make him understand, from the first line of the message, that a novice such as him has to pay more attention and respect to older people. Similarly, when Apophis addresses the recently enthroned king of Kush as ‘son’, this does not imply any Hyksos ‘sovereignty’ over Kush, only the paternalistic attitude of an older king who considers himself more authoritative and more important. Suzerainty is expressed by the lord/servant terminology.

Within the terminology of the family, the brotherhood metaphor is particularly appropriate for the political world because it does not deter ‘brothers’ from quarrelling. The Late Bronze is a typical period of brotherly rivalry and quarrels, basically over inheritance problems. The traditional, mechanical procedures associated with property and role transmission from father to son, predicated on the privileged status of the first-born, had been eroded by legal and economic changes that left more and more space to personal qualities and achievements. ‘There is no first-born nor cadet’, state the inheritance documents of the time; property will go ‘to the one who will honour them (= the parents)’. Legal documents are full of brothers quarrelling over inheritance rights. Historical records and literary tales are filled with heroic younger brothers making bids to seize their father’s throne or dispossessing their older brothers. Kingship, of course, is not the sort of property that can be divided into equal shares.

The metaphor of brotherhood, therefore, is perfectly suited to the political needs of the time: on the one side the theoretical and quite idyllic model of mutual love, on the other the occurrence of endless quarrels and rivalries. The very same metaphor may be upheld or discarded, according to the needs of the argument. A king of Amurru pretends that his brotherhood with the Ugarit king is not just a convention, but a physical reality – a fact that we know to be untrue: