

The King Has Come

The threat of chaos

Traditionally the peoples of Nepal have viewed the world around them as chaotic, dark, and threatening. A space has therefore been created out of this threatening environment in which people feel safe from the ravages of the wild. Houses are built, settlements are established, walls are built around them. Space has been transformed by human work. But that transformation of space is also accomplished by the use of ritual. Ritual transforms chaos into a sacred order. The creation of the city is the ultimate end of this transformation.

But this order is annually threatened with the arrival of the monsoon. The work in the fields is demanding. Farmers work all day and then at night re-enter the city covered in mud. People become ill. During the monsoon, therefore, the civic and moral order that governs the world collapses. This is expressed in a number of ways. There are no significant festivals during the rice-transplanting season. Ensembles [*bhajan khalah*] that meet for worship through the year put away their instruments. Vulgar language, which the rest of the year is not acceptable, is shouted across the paddy fields.

It is as if the evil that is kept outside the walls of the city enters the settlement during this time. As we have seen, the festivals that take place in the period immediately following rice transplanting are rituals of expulsion. On Gathā Mugaḥ Cahre effigies of demons are carried out of the city in much the same way that a dead body is. Processional festivals [*jātrā*] such as Nyaku Jātrā/Matayā are meant to re-establish city space. The cycle of festivals therefore is an annual renewal of the great transformation of the disordered, wild environment that resulted in the order of Newar civilisation.

That order is essentially urban. Even Newar villages have an urban character. With houses arranged in tight clusters huddled together on the dry tableland [*tar*] they are like

small towns and their communities practice the same kind of rituals as the big cities to maintain and restore that order. That urban order is most completely developed in the big cities of the Valley. At the centre of that urban order is the king. Though in some cities, such as in Bhaktapur, the palace is not physically in the centre of the settlement, nevertheless even in such places the king is very clearly central *ritually*. Processions wind through the city streets and bind the city together. But they stop at the palace. The king is at the centre of the ritual.

Kingship in medieval Nepal

The climax of Newar civilisation is undoubtedly the period of the great Malla kings. Much of the city-wide ritual that is still practised throughout the Valley was instituted by these illustrious monarchs—kings like Siddhi Narasimha Malla and Sri Nivas Malla of Lalitpur, Bhupatindra Malla of Bhaktapur and Pratap Malla of Kathmandu. These were kings that faced huge challenges to their leadership by powerful nobles. The nobles and their families resisted the king's rule. There was the constant threat of fragmentation. In order to counter that threat the Malla kings needed to impose a strong central authority. That authority was expressed very powerfully in the ritual. The powerful Malla rulers used festivals [*jātrā*], such as that of Bungadyah, to express the central and vital role that the king must play in the life of the city.

Kingship in the Jātrā

Many observers have commented on the presence of the king at the showing of the *bhoto*. But the notion of kingship has a much more central place than this. The Shah king's presence at the Jawalakhel Jātrā is a mere appendage to festival. The Malla king (now represented by his sword) is a central feature throughout the chariot's course through the city. The figure of King Narendra Deva is key in the story of how Bungadyah came to the Valley in the first place. King Sri Nivas Malla took this association further. For the king to be seen as the rainmaker, he came to be seen as in some sense the deity himself. King Sri Nivas adapted the Jātrā so that there would be a clear identification of the monarch with Karunāmaya. King Sri Nivas would take his seat on the chariot at each of the important events of the Jātrā including each time it was to move. Today the Yala

Juju is symbolised by his sword throughout the entire festival. Even today the chariot does not move until the Yala Juju has taken his place. It is the king, as much as the deity, who is the rainmaker.

The symbolism of the sword retains its power today in spite of the loss of real power to the Shah dynasty. In Lalitpur, over two hundred years after his death, when the sword arrives at the Jātrā, people can still be heard to say, “Sri Nivas has come!”

The king in the caste system

The caste system is a system of social organisation in which each of its members belongs to a particular lineage. At one time this was closely tied to ones occupation. But it was never exactly the same as ones occupation. Today one may be a bank manager but if one was born in a Tāmtrakār’s family he is always a Tāmtrakār. A Maharjan may be a taxi driver but he does not cease to be a Maharjan. The lineages have always been the basic social unit of the community. This was expressed very powerfully in the common worship of the Lineage Deity [*digu dyah*] and then again at the celebration of Mohani, although it is not so important today.

Castes have always been bound together by the ties of kinship and marriage. The idea of kinship, then, is very important in the Newar worldview. But the presence of several such castes in a society creates a threat to the overall cohesion of that community. The Newar cities, then, were always in danger of fragmenting. To answer this threat the great Malla kings imposed an increasingly powerful central control. This created a high degree of social order.

But this created a problem. Everyone in a particular lineage regards everyone else as a brother. But the presence of a king runs contrary to the idea of kinship because it creates a hierarchical division in society between the royal family and the common people. Once the position of a king is accepted each lineage tries to prove how they are higher than all the others are.

In the cities of the Kathmandu Valley each caste has had a role to play in the ritual that has given that caste significance. So in Lalitpur the Bārāhi, for instance, are not just carpenters but they are also the builders of the chariot. The king is the one who commands the castes in their public roles. In this way the king is the great upholder of *dharma*. But the king, too, has the same problem that all people have—that of periodic, temporary impurity. If a member of his family dies, then, he is impure. To be a righteous king he must ensure that his impurity is removed. The various castes that perform ritual tasks for the king are working to ensure that he is pure. Only as a pure ruler can he be a proper patron [*jajmān*] of the sacrifice regularly and renew the social order. So the very survival of the community is dependent on the king and everyone else performing his duty.

God's people in God's place under God's rule

When God chose Abraham he promised him that his descendants (God's people) will possess the promised land (God's place) and be the people of God, underneath his authority (God's rule). At the time of the Exodus when Israel became a nation Moses was made the leader of the people. Joshua followed him, hand-picked by God.¹ Under them were the 'elders' [*thākāli*]—heads of the lineages from each tribe.

As the people were about to enter the Promised Land Moses talked to them about the institution of kingship:

When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

¹ See Numbers 27.

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.
(Deuteronomy 17:14-20)

Up to this time they had not had a king. He told the people that if they appoint a king over themselves that king should meet two very important qualifications:

1. He must be one who is chosen by God.
2. He must be from among their own brothers.

So the king must be one of their kin. If he is not then he will be a tyrant. He must not be a foreigner. He must not seek to acquire great wealth or a large number of wives or a large army as the kings of other unrighteous countries do.

Above all, says Moses, the king must “write for himself on a scroll a copy of the law”. He is to read it and honour it. He must not be tyrannical as the kings of the neighbouring nations were. Rather than seeing himself as the law he is to see himself as under the law. Living under the law is key because in doing so he will remember that he is a brother of the other Israelites. And remembering his tie of kinship, the office of kingship will remain a positive blessing to the nation. If he does not he will usurp the Lord’s authority and be a tyrant.

Where there is no king

After Joshua died the people forgot the God who had created them and rescued them from Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land. So God led Israel’s enemies to oppress them. When they were oppressed they cried out to God to rescue them again so God raised up judges to lead Israel and save them.² Nevertheless, they always went back

² See the book of Judges.

to their sinful ways. The writer of the book of Judges summarised this period as one of moral and social chaos: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 19:1 & 21:25). The breakdown of society was due to one reason—there was no king.

Oppression of the Israelites continued periodically throughout the era of the judges and into that of Samuel. Samuel told the Israelites that they were being oppressed because they had turned away from the Lord and served “foreign gods” (1 Samuel 7:3). When they turned back to the Lord He gave them peace and order under Samuel’s rulership.

Israel asks for a king

When Samuel grew old and was no longer capable of leading Israel he appointed his sons to be leaders. But they did not walk in his ways and were corrupt.³ They couldn’t even keep their borders secure from the Philistine raiders. The people needed peace and stability and that could only come about if there was order. The elders came to Samuel and presented their solution: “You are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:4-5). Samuel was displeased with the desire of the Israelites in wanting a king to rule over them. The Lord told Samuel that it was not him but the Lord that they were rejecting “as they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt” (8:7-9).

The problem was that the Israelites were trying to set up their own system. They were trying to bring order about by themselves, rather than giving God the freedom to do it his way. It was not that he did not want them to have a king. It was that they wanted a king in order to be “like the other nations”. That was a personal offence to the Lord who had chosen them “out of all nations to be his treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5). The kings of other nations were tyrants. So in wanting a king like other nations they were actually willing to have a tyrant rule over them in exchange for peace and stability. The kingship

³ See 1 Samuel 8:1-3.

that the Lord wanted to give them was a good kingship. His kingship would not only bring peace and stability but also great freedom within the limits of the law.

In response to the people's demand, God chose Saul to be Israel's first king. He soon showed himself to be a hero like the judges that went before him.⁴ Although Saul was far from perfect, he did bring some stability to the rulership of Israel. Saul was one link in a chain of historical figures in the Bible, which represents the purpose of God to bring salvation through a human mediator.

David the friend of God

Saul disobeyed the Lord's command. So the Lord rejected Saul as the king. Another king was chosen whose name was David. But David's kingship was mixed like Saul's. In some ways he was like the ideal king but in others he showed that he too was corrupted by human sinfulness. He did clear the land of remaining enemies but he also committed adultery and murder.

Nevertheless God called David his friend. Once he had established his rule and brought peace to the nation he told Nathan the prophet that he wanted to build a permanent temple to the Lord in the place of the tabernacle. But God's plan was different:

That night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”

“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I

⁴ See 1 Samuel 10 & 11.

have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. (2 Samuel 7:4-14)

In this passage the following key points are made:

1. David proposes to build God a dwelling though God has never commanded him to do that.
2. God declares that he will “build a house” for David as he gives rest to his people.
3. This house is a dynasty of David’s descendants and his son will build God’s dwelling.
4. David’s son is declared to be God’s son.

David’s son Solomon fulfilled Nathan’s prophecy. He built the Lord’s temple and God came to the temple and demonstrated his immediate presence among the people. Solomon was recognised by neighbouring rulers as a wise king.⁵ But Solomon was not always wise. He married wives who had no respect for God or his law and he was enticed into the worship of idols. So Solomon represented something very good but in his rejection of pure worship he showed himself to be much less than Nathan’s prophecy would have led us to expect. So the story of Solomon leaves us with the feeling that the ideal king is still to come. He will be one who fulfils the prophecy perfectly.

⁵ See 1 Kings 4 & 10.

See your king comes to you

After Solomon's rule Israel had a succession of kings. Many of these rulers lived a life of devotion to God. But none of them was perfect. The people of Israel began to look forward to a time when a perfect king would come. He would be one who ruled justly and in whom there was no corruption.

The prophet Zechariah then added another note to this expectation:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion:
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your King comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

The King they were waiting for would be humble. He would not gather a vast army and take control by force. He would be righteous. And in his righteous humility he would bring salvation to Jerusalem.

The people of Israel waited a long time for that King.

The kingdom of God is near

After hundreds of years of waiting a lone voice sounded in the desert outside Jerusalem. It was John's and this was his message to the Israelites:

The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news! (Mark 1:15)

And then came King Jesus. He was no ordinary king. He had not been born in a palace. He did not dress in royal robes. He had no army to command—at least not that anybody could see. At first no one recognised that Jesus was a king at all. But as he spent time with his disciples teaching them about the kingdom and performing miracles to heal the sick and cast demons out of people they slowly began to recognise who he was.

“Who do you say I am?” he asked his disciples. “You are the Anointed One,” replied Peter. Peter understood he was the coming King, the one all Israel had been waiting for.

But he did not understand what kind of king he was. Jesus then told them that he must suffer many things and be rejected and killed.

The coming of the king

The time came for Jesus to give his life as a sacrifice for his people. He arrived at Jerusalem and prepared to enter the city. The disciples found a donkey with her colt and brought them to Jesus. Then the people placed their cloaks on them and Jesus sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matthew 21:8-9)

Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah uttered hundreds of years before. And the people recognised it. So they praised him as the “Son of David” as indeed he was.

Such is the exceeding sinfulness of man that those same people just five days later killed their King by nailing him to a cross. But death could not hold this King. On the third day he rose from the dead. Some weeks later, as he prepared to leave this world to go back to his Father his disciples asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They had not yet understood the nature of Jesus’ kingship. His kingship is a spiritual kingship. He did not impose his rule over any one nation of the earth. But his kingdom would grow as more and more people accepted his rule in their lives.

The King has come

Kingship in Nepal was instituted to try to ensure peace and stability in the face of the threat of conflict and chaos. People thought it was better to have a bad leader imposing his order on society than to have the threat of chaos from outside.

But the kingship of men is not the answer to man's need. It only leads to tyranny. Kingship must be invested in a kinsman. He must be one who would not oppress his people by lording it over them. He must humble himself and live under God's moral law.

In the Lord Jesus we have the incarnation [*avatar*] of the king as a man just like us. He is both king and kin. In the Lord Jesus the felt needs and aspirations of all people are met. In Jesus we have God's solution to our need for order. The chaos of the created order is a product of sin. Ever since the first man and woman rebelled against their creator the world around us has been chaotic and threatening. The great disciple of Christ, Paul wrote that the "whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:20-22). But now that Jesus, God's son, has arrived he has established his kingdom. His kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. That kingdom is growing as more and more people place themselves under his rule and become his devotees. One day the entire creation will be renewed.⁶ The King has come. Let us worship him and accept him as our ruler and saviour. Let us give to him our wholehearted devotion.

⁶ See Revelation 21:1-5.

