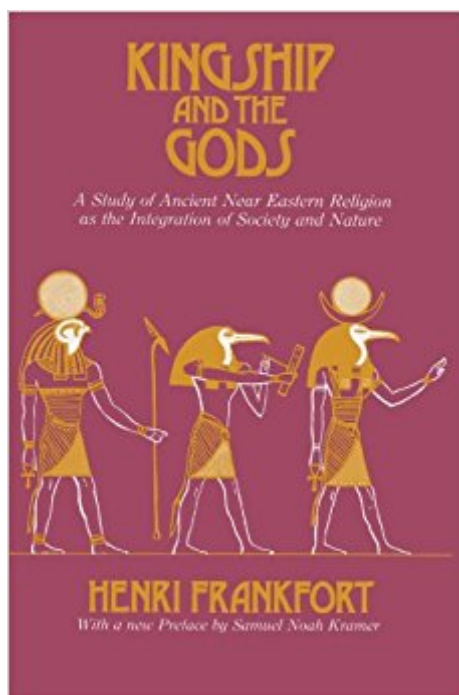


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Kingship And The Gods: A Study Of Ancient Near Eastern Religion As The Integration Of Society And Nature (Oriental Institute Essays)



Synopsis

This classic study clearly establishes a fundamental difference in viewpoint between the peoples of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. By examining the forms of kingship which evolved in the two countries, Frankfort discovered that beneath resemblances fostered by similar cultural growth and geographical location lay differences based partly upon the natural conditions under which each society developed. The river flood which annually renewed life in the Nile Valley gave Egyptians a cheerful confidence in the permanence of established things and faith in life after death. Their Mesopotamian contemporaries, however, viewed anxiously the harsh, hostile workings of nature. Frank's superb work, first published in 1948 and now supplemented with a preface by Samuel Noah Kramer, demonstrates how the Egyptian and Mesopotamian attitudes toward nature related to their concept of kingship. In both countries the people regarded the king as their mediator with the gods, but in Mesopotamia the king was only the foremost citizen, while in Egypt the ruler was a divine descendant of the gods and the earthly representative of the God Horus.

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Customer Reviews

A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature.

The late Henri Frankfort, famed equally as explorer and scholar, was director of the Warburg Institute and professor of preclassical antiquity at the University of London. Frankfort was the author

and coauthor of many books, including *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, published by the University of Chicago Press.

Another case where I have trouble deciding between four stars or three. Frankfort's work was groundbreaking, but 1948 was a long time ago in the study of Egyptian religion (on which I'll concentrate because I am no expert on Mesopotamia). A 2013 book, *Experiencing Power, Generating Authority*, explicitly presents itself as a successor to this one, and it points out in the introduction that Frankfort exaggerated the contrast between Egyptian and Mesopotamian ideology. He thought the Egyptians saw kings as incontestably divine while the Mesopotamian viewpoint treated kings as very human servants of the gods, but that contrast may look sharper than it is because different types of texts tended to survive in each region. In Egypt the grandiose royal ideology was literally written in stone on temple walls, but even there, other types of texts portray pharaohs as more human than temple inscriptions would have you believe. Georges Posener challenged Frankfort's characterization of Egyptian kingship on just those grounds, in *De la divinité du Pharaon*, as did Dietrich Wildung in *Götter und Pharaonen* and *Egyptian Saints*. A recent and even-handed but cursory assessment of the topic can be found in Garry Shaw's *The Pharaoh*. This book also has more minor errors. Most importantly, we now know that the Memphite Theology does not come from shortly after the unification of Egypt; at the earliest it dates to the New Kingdom. If you keep those caveats in mind (and ideally one of those other books in hand), this book is still a good guide to what you might call the official version of Egyptian kingship, in which the king was a god surrounded and supported by gods. It describes the coronation that began his rule and the sed festival that renewed it, and it discusses all the major divine forces that he was connected with: the royal ancestors, the royal ka, Horus, Osiris, Ra, Hathor, Amun, and even to some extent Ptah and the Ogdoad. *Kingship and the Gods* is still a cornerstone for understanding the pharaoh. It's just not the whole house.

"*Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*" (An Oriental Institute Essay, 1948) is a synthesis of ancient Egyptian (on the one hand) and Mesopotamian (on the other) ideas about the relations of humans to the larger universe. As befits a book about the builders of Pyramids and Ziggurats, it is monumental in appearance, at over 500 pages. This is due in good part to the elaborate documentation in the end-notes, and an unusually comprehensive index; the main text is about 350 pages, which is still substantial, but less formidable than it looks at first. Fortunately, Frankfort was a graceful writer in English. As recently described in

an Oriental Institute Seminar collection (OIS 4, 2008, edited by Nicole Brisch), "Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond" (coupled with this book on the page, at this writing), it remains the great monograph on the subject, despite half a century of further work, both on specific cultures and on comparative issues. Inevitably, some of this has modified Frankfort's data, and therefore his detailed conclusions. The main outlines of his argument on how these ancient cultures correlated their concepts of the divine, the socio-political, and the natural order, are still worth close attention. Samuel Noah Kramer's "New Preface" to the 1978 edition points out that it is a major comparative work by Henri Frankfort (1897-1954), a Dutch archeologist (Egypt and Iraq) and art historian, who had been working closely with a leading Egyptologist, the American John A. Wilson (1899-1976), and a prominent Danish cuneiformist and archeologist (Iraq) Thorkild Jacobsen (1904-1993), during a period in the 1930s and 1940s when they were all involved with the Oriental Institute (of the University of Chicago). Frankfort therefore had expert, and up-to-date advice on the language side, as well as his own hands-on experience. (Even if Kramer, a Sumerologist, thought more highly of the Egyptian material than he did of Frankfort's analysis of Mesopotamia....) The international background is important to mention, not only because of Frankfort's citation of editions, translations, and studies in a variety of modern languages, but because his theoretical positions often are expressed in relation to, and indeed in opposition to, themes and styles of interpretation prevailing in different "national" approaches to problems. He spends time (some would say, too much), objecting to the German scholar Kurt Sethe's elaborate interpretation of the Egyptian "Pyramid Texts" as the mythological reflection of the complex pre-historic political unification of Egypt, for example. (Although Frankfort does not mention it, Sethe may have been subtly influenced by the then-recent unification of Germany.) But he also provides a chapter demolishing James Frazer's thesis of a common Ancient Near Eastern belief in a dying and reviving god, pointing out, for example, the distinctions between Adonis (whose death is lamented), Marduk (who triumphantly emerges from the 'belly of the beast'), and Osiris, who never returns to the world of the living, but governs from the Netherworld. (The reader is left to work out the implications for various theories of Christian origins.) Although sections of the book are out of date (sometimes due to re-dating of texts), Frankfort is very good on the nature and meaning of ancient imagery, and acute in interpreting the mythological "data." He describes the Egyptian god Osiris not as a divinized human king, nor as a humanized god, but as the concept of the "Dead King(s)." The myth cannot be separated from that of Osiris' son, the god Horus, who is the conceptualization of the ruling monarch as the legitimate (and divine) successor of the preceding (divine) King. It also exists side-by-side with the alternative identification of Horus with the son and viceroy of the sun-god Ra, Creator of the

World and its original King. After expounding the theoretical (mythical/theological) basis of the Egyptian theory of kingship, Frankfort proceeds to demolish the then widely-accepted view that all Mesopotamian civilizations (Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian) also had such "divine kings." Although it has since been established that there were brief periods in which specific Mesopotamian kings announced their own divinity, complete with temple cults, he is clearly correct in arguing that the Assyrian proclamation "Assur is King!" was not an identification of the reigning king with the national god, but rather a distinction between the (merely) human ruler and the real King, ruler of gods and men. The Babylonian kings, likewise, were reminded that the real King was the god Marduk (otherwise Bel, "the Lord"), and they were his deputies. It is thought-provoking (and sobering) to compare an Oriental Institute publication of 1934, "The Oriental Origin of Hellenistic Kingship," by Calvin W. McEwan, in which most chapter titles invoked "Divine Kingship" somewhere or other, including Babylonia and Persia (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, volume 13). Frankfort as Art Historian is prominent in the early pages of the book, in which he discusses the use of size as an indicator of relative rank. A modern Western painter, assigned to show, say, Louis XIV present at a crucial battle, would place him in the foreground, gesturing as if directing events, while generals, and finally ordinary soldiers, are off in the distance doing the work. (The wonders of perspective.) The early Egyptian or Mesopotamian artist would show a gigantic KING towering over his followers and terrified adversaries alike. Although Assyrian and Babylonian art developed less obtrusive ways of glorifying rulers, Pharaohs continued to tower over mere mortals to the very end of Pharaonic civilization -- indeed, down to the triumph of Christianity, if not later. It might not seem necessary for Frankfort to place such emphasis on the obvious, but he used it to make a direct, visual, argument. Strangely, it seems that there are still people who need to read it -- I have actually read claims, in serious publications, that the earliest Pharaohs are shown fighting hand-to-hand (or club-to-head) with a race of bearded dwarfs (otherwise regarded as caricatures of Egyptian opponents with non-Pharaonic tonsures). And that this "historical" circumstance explains why non-Egyptians are so often represented in later art as midgets dominated by Mighty Pharaoh, wielding a huge mace.... It should be noted that the Oriental Institute currently has pdf versions of both Frankfort and Brisch available as free downloads (among many, many other books, including excavation reports by Frankfort and Jacobsen). Unfortunately, the "Kingship" pdf digital page numbers do not correlate with the hard-copy pages, which makes using that excellent index a pain. And there is no hyperlinking of notes to text, which makes it hard to identify references, or follow arguments relegated to the notes, at least without having a couple of files open to different pages, to switch between. I would urge anyone who can afford it to order the print version -- it is a far more

pleasant reading experience. (And one can make marginal notes, which isn't possible on the locked pdf file.) For those interested, "Kingship" can be found on the OI website under "MISCELLANEOUS PUBLICATIONS". In all fairness to the Oriental Institute, which has spent years putting its entire catalogue into digital format, this project is itself a splendid accomplishment. (And the pdf of Brisch's volume does have "logical" page numbers, with footnotes rather than endnotes, so it is a lot easier to use.) [The day after this review was posted, the Oriental Institute put up another large set of "Miscellaneous" pdfs, including "The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near," by H. and Helene A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin. Originally published in 1948, it represents much of the conceptual background in which Frankfort was working. Penguin Books issued a shortened version (without Irwin's "Old Testament" material) under the title "Before Philosophy." This is the full version, with revised select bibliographies from 1977.]

Although now somewhat outdated in certain aspects of interpretation, this book surely will remain as one of the pillars for the study of ancient Egyptian religion, and, in fact, is one of the never-absent bibliographic references. I do not agree in toto with Frankfort's ideas about several subjects, but I must confess that it is one of the most interesting studies that I ever read about the matter. There are many thought-provoking ideas! Buy it, read it, learn from it. Both for the learned and the newcomer!

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