

Good Governance: the Ideal of Kingship in the ancient Near East

by Cindy Meijer

Introduction

It is a question of all times: what is good governance? How should a king behave towards his subjects? Should his power be limited by certain boundaries, and if so, to what extent? Throughout the ages, different peoples have answered these questions in a variety of ways, often resulting in literary texts containing guidelines for good governance. This type of text is known in German as a 'Fürstenspiegel', which can be translated as 'Mirror of Princes'. This term is appropriate, considered the fact that such a text reflects on the behavior, tasks and responsibilities of a monarch and gives advice on proper conduct. The purpose of the author was to hold a mirror up to the king's face and in this way raise awareness of possible shortcomings. Works belonging to this genre were composed in many cultures and times: we know examples of Greek and Roman origin, which inspired later Byzantine and medieval texts. However, it is relatively unknown that a much earlier 'Fürstenspiegel' exists, namely a Babylonian version dubbed by modern scholars 'Advice to a Prince' or 'Babylonischer Fürstenspiegel'. This literary composition can be viewed as the ancient Near Eastern answer to the question how a good king should act. Despite its small size of only 60 lines, it provides insights into a Babylonian ideal of kingship. In the following article, we will take a closer look at this text and the virtues of a good Babylonian king, but also at the crimes he should never commit.



Relief of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (copyright Timo Roller)

The Babylonian 'Fürstenspiegel'

In the year 1873, during his search for new fragments of the Babylonian story of the Deluge, Assyriologist George Smith uncovered a cuneiform tablet broken in two halves in the remains of king Assurbanipal's library in Nineveh. That this fascinating text contained warnings to the king and his officials, focusing on the negligence of justice and its consequences. The first eight lines of the Babylonian 'Fürstenspiegel' are exemplary for the content of the rest of the composition:

'If the king does not heed justice, his people will fall into anarchy, his land will become wasteland.

If he does not heed the law of his land, Ea [the god of wisdom], the king of destinies, will alter his destiny, and misfortune will again and again follow him.

If he does not heed his princes, his days will be short.

If he does not heed the scholar, his land will rebel against him.

If he heeds a rude man, the reason of the land will change.

If he heeds the craft of Ea, the great gods

in consultation will again and again follow him with ways of justice.'

Each sentence mentions an offense committed by the king and links this action to a punishment. A clear causal relationship exists between the action of the king and the adversity that follows it. Because the king has neglected the justice of the land, the gods become enraged and punish the royal wrongdoer in an appropriate way, often resulting in conquests by a 'foreign enemy'. This part of the text can be seen as a general introduction, after which the author of the text arrives at his main point of interest and the actual theme of the 'Fürstenspiegel': the defense of the privileges of the cities of Nippur, Sippar, and Babylon, such as exemption from forced labor.

Nippur, Sippar and Babylon were ancient cult centers in Mesopotamia, where the temples of Enlil, Šamaš and Marduk were located. These cities were granted special privileges. For example, their citizens were exempted from service obligations and could not be compelled to perform military service or participate in royal building projects. Violation of these freedoms was seen as a terrible transgression to be punished by divine wrath. The freedoms that had to be protected against royal misbehavior were known in Babylonian as *šubarrû*. The literary text provides a mythological foundation for this institution: it states that the chief deities of the Babylonian pantheon decided in their assembly that the inhabitants of Sippar, Nippur and Babylon should be exempted from service. In reality, such exemptions were granted by the king and could be retracted in times of crisis. It is striking that the crimes that are targeted at one of the temple cities is avenged by the god of the city in question, while suffering of the three cities together is retaliated by Marduk as the chief of the pantheon or by gods that embody powers of nature. We read that if the king imposes forced labor on the citizens of Sippar, Nippur and Babylon, Marduk will turn over his land to the enemy, so that his people will have to perform corvée work for the enemy. Not only the king is warned in this way: high officials and dignitaries are also expected to respect the special status of the ancient temple cities, even under penalty of death. Scholars and chief temple administrators are advised not to take bribes or denounce the words of the citizens of the privileged cities lest they shall die by the sword on the command of Ea, the god of wisdom and creator of mankind. The gods appear as the avengers of a variety of misdeeds against the privileges of the Babylonian cities.

Kings and officials



A portrait of Marduk-apla-iddina II, according to many scholars the 'culprit' whose deeds inspired the 'Fürstenspiegel', with the first 20 lines of the cuneiform text in the background

But who is the enigmatic king that plays the leading part in this Babylonian literary work? Because his name remains unmentioned throughout the narrative, scholars can only speculate about the answer to this question. In an attempt to fix a date for the composition of the text, scholars have looked at the use of administrative terminology and grammatical features as well as political events that bear resemblance to the described occurrences. The discussion has resulted in a variety of possible dates, ranging from the time of Hammurabi (1792-1750) to that of Sennacherib (704-681), the Assyrian king who destroyed Babylon.

Arguments were put forth to identify the 'culprit' as the Chaldean king Marduk-apla-iddina II (on the throne of Babylon in 721-710 and 703), known in the Bible as Merodach-Baladan. Others argued for an identification of that king with Nabû-šumu-iškun (760-748) or

Sennacherib, in particular because the latter had destroyed Babylon. The latest date of composition is in any case the 8th century as a copy of the text was found in an archive from Nippur that is dated to the 8th century. The likelihood that the text was composed earlier is high. Not all scholars assume that the Babylonian 'Fürstenspiegel' was composed with a specific king in mind. Some view the work as a normative piece of literature that could be used to criticize the king whenever this was deemed necessary, for example when property and rights were endangered. This theory is supported by evidence from Babylonian letters that quote the 'Fürstenspiegel'. This example underlines the political significance of the 'Fürstenspiegel' and makes clear that it was used to actively influence the political situation in the country.

Now, who was responsible for the creation of this fascinating text? As no authors are mentioned, we should ask whose interests are protected in the work. As we have seen, the text focuses on the rights of the inhabitants of Nippur, Sippar and Babylon. According to the text, the gods will punish a king who dares to impose fines and labor upon the citizens, takes bribes from them, voids their agreements and

confiscates their property. Hence, it was the local elite of these ancient cult cities, the urban families whose identity and self-esteem derived from their service to the ancient gods of Babylonia.

Taxes, freedom and the Achaemenid Empire

Taxes – in particular freedom from taxes – play an important role in the Babylonian 'Fürstenspiegel'. Again, the concept of *šubarrû* is crucial. The inhabitants of Nippur, Sippar and Babylon were exempted from corvée work and military service, which were significant forms of taxation in the ancient Near East. However, in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods, the inhabitants of these cities did perform corvée work and military service! The rich elite normally chose to pay silver instead of performing the labor themselves by hiring a substitute. Yet, they were certainly not exempt from paying taxes. How and why that happened will be investigated in the Vidi project "Paying for *All the King's Horses and All the King's Men: A Fiscal History of the Achaemenid Empire*".

Further Reading

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