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The Politics of Conquest

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Dear Peter,

Last April at the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology here in Jerusalem, a scene took place that people are still talking about. Scholarly congresses in general and archaeological congresses in particular are usually sedate gatherings, but when Professor Norman K. Gottwald of the Graduate Theological Union of Berkeley, California stood at the podium and gave his paper, "Israelite Settlement as a Social Revolutionary Movement," the reaction from the assembled scholars was anything but sedate.

The lecture itself was predictable; Gottwald's self-professed Marxism and the methodology of what he calls "Biblical Sociology" are well known and the audience faced him with the same stony silence that his 916 page book, The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BC, has received. But when he finished delivering his lecture and the floor was opened to discussion and comment, Gottwald faced one of the most blistering personal attacks and condemnations that one is likely ever to hear at a scholarly congress, Biblical or otherwise.

As I've learned from a number of people who were present at the congress, a well-known and outspoken archaeologist from Tel Aviv University was the first to reply. He stood up from his seat in the presence of the approximately 800 assembled scholars to lambaste Gottwald's political motives, his intellectual honesty, and even his educational qualifications. The reaction of the audience to these ad hominem arguments was an oppressive, nervous silence. Gottwald himself just smiled weakly until the ordeal was over and the next speaker took his place.

If the issues that Gottwald had raised at the congress were not so deeply intertwined with modern religious and political sensibilities, his admittedly daring hypothesis might not have aroused such a violent response. If he had suggested, for instance, that economic and social factors could have played an important role in the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in Greece, Mesopotamia, or Egypt, the assembled scholars might have listened politely and may even have accepted some of his arguments. But the issue at stake here was of much more immediate significance; Gott-

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wald believes that the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in Canaan-- the period of the conquest and settlement of the country by the twelve Israelite tribes-- was not brought on by a divinely-inspired immigration from Egypt of a defined ethnic group, but by a social revolution of oppressed farmers, herdsmen, and craftsmen in Canaan itself.

Gottwald is not the first scholar to challenge the authenticity of the Biblical story of Joshua's conquest; he is the scholarly heir of a critical tradition that has been a matter of dispute for the last 60 years. The particular Biblical narrative at issue in this controversy is contained in the first 12 chapters of the Book of Joshua, which describes how after the death of Moses in the wilderness, Joshua, his chosen successor, led the Children of Israel across the Jordan River to conquer in quick succession the Canaanite cities of Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, Debir, and Hazor. Having thus fulfilled their God-given mission by destroying the Canaanite cities and driving the Canaanites from the land, each of the twelve tribes reportedly received a parcel of the conquered territory as a tribal inheritance. These tribal allotments became permanent territorial divisions in the later Israelite kingdoms, and the force of the tradition is so strong that tribal names are used for many of the administrative districts of the State of Israel today.

This Biblical story was a matter of faith for centuries, but that faith began to erode with the beginning of archaeological excavations in this country in the 1920's and 1930's. At that time, American and European expeditions first sought to uncover physical evidence of a violent conquest of the major Canaanite cities at the time of Joshua, around 1250 BC, and archaeological evidence they obtained was unsettling: at Jericho, for instance, there was no sign of a destruction after 1400 BC and the city of Ai was found not to have been occupied in that period at all.

The apparent archaeological contradiction to the Biblical story led two German scholars, Albrecht Alt and his student Martin Noth, to suggest a radically different explanation for the Israelite "conquest."[1] Basing their theories on ancient Egyptian records rather than on Biblical tradition, they suggested that the Israelite settlement of Canaan was the result of gradual immigration, not a unified military campaign. They based this reconstruction on the 14th century BC Tell el Amarna Letters, a collection of diplomatic correspondence between the Egyptian Pharaoh and various Canaanite princes, which frequently mentioned the activities of a restive and rebellious group called apiru on the frontiers of the settled land. Alt and Noth followed

earlier scholars in their equation of apiru with "Hebrews," but they went much further in assessing its historical significance. Since the apiru/Hebrews were already present in Canaan and hostile to the Canaanite rulers more than a century before the time of Joshua, Alt and Noth formulated the theory that the early Israelites were pastoral nomads who had slowly filtered in to the settled land from the desert, and after a long period of uneasy coexistence with the settled population, they overran and destroyed the Canaanite city-states.

The Alt-Noth school of Biblical interpretation received widespread attention in the 1930's and it was attacked by religious fundamentalists and by many Biblical archaeologists. Opponents saw the "immigration" theory as an attempt to undermine the spiritual authority of the Bible on the one hand, and on the other, as a secular-humanist affront to the historical uniqueness of Israel in favor of a more mechanistic anthropological approach. There were, however, some scholars who believed that the new theory was confirmed by the archaeological evidence. In the early 1950's, Dr. Yohanan Aharoni, one of the most fervent Alt-Noth supporters among Israeli archaeologists, believed that he had found conclusive evidence in Upper Galilee. He discovered a group of 17 small, unfortified settlements in the traditional territory of the tribe of Naphtali, which he suggested represented the arrival of an early wave of apiru or "proto-Israelites."[2]

This discovery sharpened the controversy between the Biblical traditionalists and the adherents of the immigration theory, and a showdown took place at the excavations of Hazor in northern Israel from 1955 to 1958. The director of the excavations was Dr. Yigael Yadin, archaeologist, former chief-of-staff of the Israeli army, and vociferous proponent of the historicity of Joshua's conquest. Aharoni, whose ideas were quite different, also took part in the excavations as a senior staff member. Both agreed that Hazor, the last and most powerful of the cities reportedly conquered by the Israelites, would be the perfect testing ground for the conflicting theories about the nature of the Israelite conquest.

After several seasons of digging, Yadin and the traditionalists were the victors, at least in the opinion of most archaeologists. The excavations uncovered unmistakable evidence of violent destruction around 1250 BC that marked the end of urban Canaanite occupation at the site.[3] Even more significant was the meager, unfortified settlement built in the destruction debris. This temporary encampment contained pottery and artifacts strikingly similar to those found in Aharoni's "proto-Israelite" settlements, but since it was established on top of the ruins

and therefore after the violent conquest of the city, the theory of gradual and peaceful Israelite immigration was dealt a serious blow.

The Hazor excavations did not end the debate. Both sides clung to their theories even more tenaciously than before, with Aharoni claiming that the Israelite settlement at Hazor was really much later than his "proto-Israelite" sites.[4] And as the Yadin-Aharoni controversy grew more bitter with the passage of years, it became quite evident that the issues at stake were far broader than the specific nature of the Israelite conquest. For Yadin, the idea of a single, unified conquest by Joshua meshed perfectly with his understanding of the other great transformations in the history of the country, victorious military campaigns by the Hyksos, the Egyptians, the Romans, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Turks, the British, and by the modern Israelis themselves. And for Aharoni, who had nothing comparable to Yadin's military background, the theory of gradual and peaceful immigration of Israelites into Canaan was in neat accord with his own ideas about the processes of cultural change.

Despite their obvious differences, however, there were some underlying assumptions about the Israelite settlement that both Yadin and Aharoni shared. Both the immigration and conquest theories presumed that a new ethnic group had entered the country, and, regardless of the uniqueness of its religion, this ethnic group lived at a far lower level of civilization than the native Canaanites. Both Yadin and Aharoni characterized these early Israelites as "semi-nomads" and both believed that the conquest of Canaan, whether by military campaign or by infiltration, should be seen in the context of the timeless conflict between Middle Eastern farmers and nomads-- between "the Desert and the Sown."

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After the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the mountainous region in the center of the country, both Yadin's and Aharoni's students conducted extensive surveys and excavations there and a compromise position began to coalesce. Instead of concentrating on the precise sequence of events described in the Book of Joshua, both the "immigration" and "conquest" advocates found it more productive to concentrate on the more subtle cultural transformation brought about by the Israelite settlement.

Throughout the West Bank-- in the traditional tribal territories (and new administrative districts) of Manasseh, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Judah-- Israeli archaeologists found dozens of

early Iron Age herdsmens' enclosures and unfortified villages with much simpler artifacts and pottery than those found in the Canaanite cities of the preceding Late Bronze Age.[5] And in the opinion of most Biblical archaeologists, both in Israel and abroad, these finds seemed to be clear proof that the Israelite settlement was the result of the arrival of land-hungry semi-nomads coming in from the desert, abandoning their wanderings, and in a true sense, inheriting their promised land.

This neat historical reconstruction soon ran into difficulties, however, when anthropologists and archaeologists working in other parts of the Middle East challenged the basic assumptions on which the various theories of Israelite settlement were based. The first and most important of these assumptions was the 19th-century belief that throughout antiquity the Syrian and Arabian deserts contained vast numbers of turbulent nomads who periodically invaded and ravaged the settled land. This assumption was itself ravaged by a growing consensus among anthropologists in the 1960's that the great deserts had not been able to support more than a handful of pure nomads before the widespread domestication of the camel around 1200 BC.[6]

Since this development took place after the Israelites were already in Canaan, it was extremely unlikely that the example of a "bedouin invasion" could be applied to them. In fact, a re-examination of the Biblical evidence led certain scholars to the conclusion that the Israelites were not pure nomads but primarily sheep and goat herders, pastoralists of a type known to roam with their flocks, not in the desert, but always on the fringes of the arable land.[7]

So if the Israelites' desert origins were shown to be a mirage, what of their hypothesized hostility to the settled peoples of Canaan whom they had supposedly driven from the land? This assumption, too, was undermined when anthropologists working in Central Asia, the Middle Euphrates Valley, and in North Africa began to study the economic symbiosis between pastoral nomads and agriculturalists to discover that they are not natural enemies, but components of a single cultural complex.[8]

Disputing the accepted image of natural enmity between pastoral nomads and farmers, the French anthropologist Henri Charles recognized in the 1930's, in his study of the modern 'Agêdât people in the Middle Euphrates Valley, that there is usually close seasonal cooperation between the two ways of life.[9] Since the summer grain harvest throughout much of the Middle East coincides with the drying up of the grazing lands on the edges of the desert, the natural movement of pastoralists and their flocks

back toward the well-watered agricultural regions necessitates and even encourages cooperation between the two groups. At the least, Charles pointed out, the pastoralists may be hired as seasonal agricultural workers and their flocks be allowed to graze (and thereby fertilize with their manure) in the stubble of the harvested fields. At most, as in the case of the 'Agêdât, the pastoralists and the farmers may be members of a single community, whose nomadic members wander off to the desert steppe in the winter, while the sedentary members stay behind to prepare and plant the fields.

This pattern of a segmented pastoral/agricultural society was apparently also common in the ancient Middle East. In an intensive examination of references to nomads in the cuneiform archives of the Middle Bronze Age city of Mari, also on the Euphrates, John Luke of the University of Michigan discovered that a hypothetical invasion from the desert in that period was a misreading of the evidence.[10] Although he found references to sporadic hostility between farmers and herders-- as is common in all human societies-- Luke convincingly demonstrated that the ancient records did not differentiate between settled peasants and raiding nomads; the distinction was, instead, between peasants who tended animals and peasants who tended crops.

The research into the nature of pastoral nomadism suggested that the convenient, evolutionary assumptions about the ancient Israelites' gradual transformation from nomads to farmers should be turned upside-down. From an anthropological standpoint, the Israelite pastoralists and the Canaanite farmers belonged to the same economic system. If there had been any significant movements of population, its source could only have been in the settled regions, and it would have been, in the words of Luke, "toward the steppe and desert, not out of the desert toward the sown."[11]

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Then came Professor George Mendenhall, a feisty Biblical scholar who was one of John Luke's teachers at Michigan, and who rejected both the "immigration" and "conquest" theories of Israelite settlement with equal disdain. For years, Mendenhall had been a voice in the wilderness of Biblical scholarship, claiming that the rise of the Israelite religion and tribal confederacy could be explained solely on the basis of internal social developments in Canaan during the Late Bronze Age. As early as 1947, he reviewed the evidence of the Tell el Amarna Letters and found some indications that the apiru, long identified as invading Hebrews, were not an ethnic group at all, but a well-defined social class.[12]

Mendenhall argued that the city-states of Late Bronze Age Canaan were organized as highly stratified societies, with the king or governor at the top of the pyramid, the princes, court officials, and chariot warriors right below him, and the rural peasants at the base. The apiru were apparently outside this scheme of organization, and they seem to have threatened the social order in a number of ways. Mendenhall pointed out that besides being pastoralists on the fringes of the settled land, they sometimes also served as mercenaries for the highest bidder, and, when that work was not forthcoming, some apiru actively encouraged the peasants to rebel.

In Tell el Amarna Letter 73, from King Rib-Adda of Byblos to the Pharaoh, the threat is made explicit. A rebel leader had advised the peasants of a nearby village to assassinate their overlord, "and they joined with the apiru," Rib-Adda reported, "so the governors are saying: 'Thus he will do to us, and all the lands will join with the apiru.'"[13]

The context for this social unrest, Mendenhall asserted, was not a conflict between nomads and a settled population, but between the rural population and the rulers of the city-states. The Tell el Amarna Letters are filled with reports of famine and hardship and the increasingly onerous exactions by the kings of agricultural and pastoral produce. It was no wonder, noted Mendenhall, that the apiru had great success in stirring up the peasants and that many Canaanite cities were destroyed at that time. The Late Bronze Age cities of Canaan were not modern cities; they were little more than well-fortified administrative centers of regional feudal regimes. Their destruction was not a military victory alone. It was also the effective termination of the economic system that the city had maintained.

"Both the Amarna materials and the Biblical events represent the same political process," Mendenhall wrote in 1970, "namely, the withdrawal, not physically and geographically, but politically and subjectively, of large population groups from any obligation to existing political regimes, and therefore the renunciation of any protection from these sources. In other words, there was no statistically important invasion of Palestine at the beginning of the twelve tribe system of Israel. There was no radical displacement of population, there was no genocide, there was no large scale driving out of population, only of royal administrators (of necessity!). In summary, there was no real conquest of Palestine in the sense that has usually been understood; what happened instead may be termed, from the point of view of the secular historian interested only in socio-political processes, a peasants' revolt against the network of interlocking Canaanite city-states."[14]

At the heart of Mendenhall's "peasant revolt" theory was a novel explanation of how the Israelite religion began.[15] Mendenhall maintained that the apiru and their peasant supporters could never have united and overcome Canaanite feudal domination without a compelling ideology. And he believed that their ideology, the worship of a single transcendant God, Yahweh, was a brilliant response to the religion of the Canaanite kings.

Instead of relying on a pantheon of divinities and elaborate fertility rituals (that could be performed only by the king and his official priesthood), the new religious movement, Mendenhall believed, placed their faith in a single God who established egalitarian laws of social conduct and who communicated them directly to each member of the community. The hold of the kings over the people was therefore effectively broken by the spread of this new faith. And for Mendenhall, the true Israelite conquest was accomplished-- without invasion or immigration-- when large numbers of Canaanite peasants overthrew their masters and became "Israelites."

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Although Mendenhall's theories offered a completely new basis for the study of Israelite origins, no prominent archaeologists working in Israel took them very seriously. His theories were dismissed as pure speculation, ingenious perhaps, but in no way necessitated by the archaeological finds. Most Biblical archaeologists saw no need to familiarize themselves with anthropological studies of pastoral nomads or historical-sociological study of ancient Canaanite society. For most, the familiar idea of Israelite semi-nomads coming out of the desert to cast out the natives and to inherit the land had a particularly forceful appeal. And with the election of the Likud government in Israel in 1977, traditionally-oriented excavations and surveys on the West Bank received dramatically increased official funding, a development that may have been more than coincidentally connected to the government's modern settlement plans.

At this point in archaeological history, Norman K. Gottwald, the much-reviled Marxist Biblical scholar, arrived on the scene. In his 1979 book, The Tribes of Yahweh, he accepted and expanded Mendenhall's theories, but he also went a step further; he attacked the archaeological evidence head-on.[16] While Mendenhall had merely dismissed all the talk of the settlement of semi-nomads in the hill country and on the fringes of the desert, Gottwald believed that those sites were, in fact, Israelite, but he made this identification for completely different reasons.

He theorized that the remote frontier and forest regions

were naturally attractive to the members of an independence movement who had fled from the more heavily populated (and more closely controlled) plains and valleys to establish a new way of life. Gottwald suggested that their settlement in this rocky and poorly watered region was possible primarily because of technological developments: iron tools for hewing cisterns in the bedrock and waterproof plaster for sealing the cistern walls.[17]

In 1957, Aharoni had suggested a similar explanation for the Israelite settlement in the hill country, but he explained the simplicity of the artifacts in the accompanying dwellings as evidence of the Israelites' primitive, semi-nomadic origins. But now Gottwald countered that explanation by suggesting that the simplicity of the artifacts at Israelite sites was merely evidence of the break-down in trade of luxury items that had been carried on exclusively by the Canaanite nobility.[18]

Unfortunately, Gottwald and his theories were tantalizingly easy targets for his conservative colleagues. His Marxist political orientation gave rise to suspicions that his reconstruction of a peasant revolt on the West Bank was merely a chronological transposition of his support for the modern Palestinian Arab cause. His image of scholarly impartiality was not bolstered by the identity of his publisher, Orbis Books of Maryknoll, N.Y., a notorious hotbed of "liberation theology," nor by his admission in the preface to his book that his interest in ancient Israel had been deeply influenced by "two decades of involvement in civil rights struggles, in opposition to the war in Vietnam, in anti-imperialist efforts, (and) in analysis of North American capitalism."[19]

But the criticism of Norman Gottwald at the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology last spring went far beyond the arguments necessary to counter his historical theories. The intensity of the opposition he aroused may, in fact, be an index of the importance of the religious concept he challenged-- the long-cherished distinction between "Israelite" and "Canaanite." For as Gottwald demonstrated quite clearly, the Biblical narrative speaks primarily of the destruction of Canaanite cities and the defeat of Canaanite kings.

Both Mendenhall and Gottwald contend that it was only several centuries later, after the Israelites had themselves adopted a monarchy, that the Biblical narrative, in its constantly evolving form, was overlaid with an ethnic interpretation to insure the economic and political power of the Israelite kings. The force of the original Israelite movement, they believe, was resurrected only briefly by the Classical Prophets, and after the fall of the last king in Jerusalem in 586 BC, the events of the Israelite settlement in Canaan, though preserved and sanctified in the Bible,

were no longer understood in their historical context.

His colleagues wouldn't listen. Instead of trying to disprove Gottwald's theories on the basis of the Biblical or archaeological evidence, most archaeologists are so committed to the traditional interpretations of the Biblical story that they dismiss the "peasant revolt" theory without comment and continue to interpret the archaeological evidence according to their pre-conceived paradigm. On a scientific level, the only advance since the 1950's has been the speed with which scholars spin around the vicious circle: certain artifacts are identified as "Israelite" because they are found at "Israelite" sites, and new "Israelite" sites are identified because they contain "Israelite" artifacts.

With such headline-grabbing discoveries as the "Altar of Joshua" near Nablus and the "Temple Magazine" at Shiloh, some Israeli archaeologists working on the West Bank are finding that generous funding from conservative religious and political groups is not hard to generate. Since 1969, 231 previously unknown Israelite settlements have been discovered on the West Bank,[20] and there are plans underway to make several of the sites national parks.[21] But despite the abundance of the archaeological material and, in many cases, the identification of ruins with places mentioned in the Bible, the intensive digging and surveying have added precious little to a better understanding of what early Israelite culture was all about.

If this were purely academic myopia, affecting only a select circle of scholars in an ivory-towered world, then the present mania for digging and the decided lack of advance from that activity would not be so dangerous. But the historical understanding of ancient Israelite settlement on the West Bank is intimately connected to current political and religious positions and to territorial and ethnic claims. Put simply, questioning the nature of ancient Israelite settlement there is to question the course of modern settlement there as well.

That's why the attack on Professor Norman K. Gottwald at the archaeological congress last spring is still being talked about. For those who insist on seeing Israelite settlement as a divinely-ordained struggle between invading Israelites and native Canaanites, Gottwald's humiliation was a well-deserved victory over a potentially subversive element. And for those who have less firm ideological preconceptions, the intensity displayed by Gottwald's critics was a vivid demonstration of the political issues at stake in Biblical archaeology today.

Best Regards,

Neil

NOTES

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