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"Hebrew Origins"

a review of chapters I to IV

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A very excellent account
your reading is most
impressive since your account
is so clear and logical
and simple.

"Hebrew Origins"

By T. J. Meek ;

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A review of Chapters one to four.

"Hebrew origins" is written by a language scholar. It represents an attempt, by means of literary criticism, to discover the truth about Hebrew origins. Very revealing is the discovery that even a textual approach to these questions is far from revealing a simple answer. This would suggest that the old testament writers were truer to historic fact than has been supposed by many enlightened people. As archaeological discoveries are made, and new attempts in the light of the new evidence, are made to re-interpret the texts, the suggestion is amply sustained. This publication is such a one. It is a revelation to this reviewer in the following ways. First, that the literary approach discovers so many problems; secondly that the resolution of the problems finds, in so many cases, great assistance from the archaeologists' spade. And thirdly, because this fruitful co-operation is possible, the fact that a great deal of Old Testament historic references is true.

Chapter I "Origin of the Hebrew People."

Professor Meek attacks the most difficult problem in his first chapter. Although some attention is paid to archaeology it can be readily seen that the author's main field is literature. The emphasis is upon literary sources, both Biblical and extra-biblical. The evidence of philology is constantly examined and sifted.

The traditional biblical story of the origin of the Hebrew people is simple. Taken at its face value it is simple. Upon examination however, it presents its problems. It becomes

evident that the stories have been idealized and drawn into one nationalized history, causing a great deal of confusion. Archaeological evidence adds to the confusion. There is need of a reinterpenetration.

The name Hebrew means "one who passes", a wanderer. It is a descriptive term and not until late in its history did it come to convey an ethnic meaning. Its equivalent appears in Cuneiform literature as early as the twentieth century and as late as the eleventh century B.C. It appears here all over the fertile crescent. It was used always as a term of reproach - meaning a barbarian, a plunderer, a nomad. It referred to men without a country, soldiers of fortune or mercenaries. What is very likely its equivalent appears in Egyptian literature dating from 1300 to 11600 B.C. Here it is used as a foreign word and name and always an appellation. The Hebrews have not a simple racial origin, their early names are Semitic and non-Semitic. All evidence goes to show that the origin of the Hebrew people is thoroughly complex.

In 2000 B.C. there began an infiltration of Hurrians into the Fertile crescent from the Caucasian mountains. There is plenty of evidence for the fact that these people infected the whole of the fertile crescent although they were not overinfluential in Egypt. In 1750 B.C. On the heels of the Hurrians came the Hyksos. This was not an ethnic group. It came down from the north and pushed well into Egypt in successive waves. The date of Abraham is computed to be around 1800 B.C. His first migration into Palestine would seem to be contemporary with Hurrian migration west. It was more than likely that these early "Hebrews" came as hangers on to the Hurrians. This possibility is given further support by the appearance in Genesis of stories like Rachel's theft of the household gods and Esau's renouncement of his birthright: stories which have Hurrian parallels but for which no Semitic parallels can be found. With the advent of the Hyksos, some of the Hebrews were carried into the land of Egypt. When the Egyptians united to drive off the Hyksos they drove the Hebrews with them. Syria came under the power of Egypt.

As Egyptian power weakened however parts of Syria began to rebel. The "Hebrews" began to enter the land again. They helped the rebels and then took possession of the land. They got control of many cities and for the first time had a land of their own. It was not a sudden invasion but a long process in which there was much unrest. The loyal nobles of many of the neighboring cities kept constantly sending to the King in Egypt for help against these plunderers. It is doubtless this state of affairs which is described in the old Testament story of the Joshua campaign. It is interesting to note that it is only from these cities that the Bible mentions as not being captured that the letters, asking for help came. Doubtless the story of the Joshua campaign has its basis in historic fact.

All evidence however points to the fact that this took place between 1400 and 1300 B.C. The invaders were loosely organized as allied tribes. They came into possession of part of the Jordan valley and the eastern highlands of Galilee. The alliance was in the form of a covenant and had its home at Shechem. Taking all the evidence into consideration this is the conclusion Professor Meek finds he must reach.

Other stories must be reconciled with the facts as he knows them, however. The Moses stories and the Exodus stories which in a confusing way have been combined by a nationalistic historian with those of the Israelites, present another problem. Meek sees in them the adventures of a southern group of similar peoples. This was a Transjordan group which was forced to push south around Palestine. Some tribes may have got as far as Egypt. It can be shown that there were many foreigners in Egypt, hospitably treated, from 1500 to 1200 B.C. From Egyptian "finds" it can be gathered that Rameses II was the Pharo of the oppression. He is known to have put these foreign peoples to work. At this time probably a small part of the so-called "Hebrew" element (part of the tribe of Levi) bounded back into the desert and mingled again with their kinsmen. The date of this can only be conjectured as being much later than the Joshua campaign in the north.

Among these southern tribes there was evidently another confederacy. Professor Meek, after sifting the evidence

especially that found in the confused old Testament literature decides that it must have taken place at Kadesh. He also chooses to believe that it was a covenant under Yahweh. The covenant did doubtless not contain the law as is given but it was nevertheless of such a nature as to knit the confederacy. With this they pushed slowly north sometime in the twelfth century. Their movement was simultaneous with the Philistine influx. Judah soon came to be the dominant tribe and it early intermingled and took possession of the land north of it.

Among these invading people there seemed also to be some native tribes who joined the confederacy, driven into it by a common peril. Professor Mack chooses to call these Canaanite.

Thus there are three main groups of people which went to make up what came to be known as the Hebrew people. The first group including the tribes of Asher, Dan, Naphtali, Zebulun, Issachar, and Simeon were the native group. Earlier than the invasive "Hebrews" and settled in the north. The second group settling in East Central Palestine somewhere about 1425. This was the Levantine confederacy of Joshua. It included such tribes as Gilead, Gad, Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, and Reuben. The third and south group included the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Levi with the possible addition of the Kenites, Calebites, Kenizzites and Jerahmeelites. This group finally settled around 1175 B.C.

This is Professor Mack's solution of the difficulties presented in the Biblical history of this period. Both the early and later dates are given in the Old Testament for the invasion of Canaan. Extra Biblical evidence is also given in support of the two invasions of Canaan by people who later came to be known as Hebrews. The two histories were later combined by a nationalistic historian who, to add to the confusion was a Jew.

The two kingdoms must have had a separate origin. (That is to a great extent) is evident from their later history. They had their first union under Saul - a northerner - which was only partial. Under David the union was stronger

Judah forged to the front but there was union only against the common enemy the Philistines. With the death of Solomon the union split again.

The language Professor comes again to the fore as he cites the considerable differences in language of the two groups of being further indication of their separate origins.

In comment, upon the closing of the chapter, this reviewer, in the greenness of his knowledge of the whole field, can only say that the evidence seems convincing. The author seems in no doubt of the validity of Testamental evidence. This of course is dealt with in a critical fashion but the faith is there and it can be said it is usually ratified by other historic data.

Chapter II "Origin of Hebrew Law"

The problem of this origin has been raised somewhat by the discoveries, in modern times, of three other contemporary and earlier law codes. There are :- the code of Hammurabi king of Babylon, dating c. 1955-1913 B.C. found at the Elamite Capital - Susa; the Assyrian law code dated in the fifteenth century found at Ashur; Hittite code dated in the same century and found at Boghaz Koi. The Hebrew Torah can now be compared with other law codes of contemporary peoples.

Before entering upon a comparison of these four codes, Professor Meek chooses to assure the student that they are not really codes in the true sense of the term. They are not exhaustive but rather show the procedure. They are an accumulation of precedents, gained through experience containing old and new material in the same "Code". For example in the Torah there is material dating from the ninth, seventh, sixth and fifth centuries B.C. It is not in a logical order and there are many inconsistencies.

With reference to the comparison of these four codes Professor Meek is of the opinion that although there are similarities between them there is no direct influence or borrowing.

In all four codes there is used, in some cases, the same technical language. The language professor is in familiar territory in this connection. He is also sure, however, that in other cases the terms are different and the tense is different. There are parallels in the laws. The Hittite and Hebrew codes are parallel in their treatment of adulterers. If it is in open country, the man is to be punished. If it is where a delinquent could have been summoned, both parties are to be punished. The Assyrian and Hebrew codes are the same with reference to the marriage of the son next in line or even the father to the widow if she were childless. In the Hammurabi code we have many more parallels and even a parallel development. At first theft was punished by a death sentence, then only the theft of temple goods was punished by a death sentence with fines and restitution for the ordinary thief. However there are differences. Although relatively later the Hebrew code is not fashioned for such a complex social structure as were the other codes. The Hebrew code remained democratic, all were equal before the law and the thief only was punished not the one who received the stolen goods.

The whole study leads me back to posit that although there was no direct connection between these codes, (a connection of the Torah with the Hammurabi code being the most likely of any) there is a common source in Babylonian practices. It is a common inheritance which developed differently under the different peoples. The Hebrew law remained nomadic in character until a much later date and its development is characterized by this fact. With the change of environment, as these tribes settled in Canaan, perhaps some Canaanite practices were adopted. The "civilized" element in this code might have come from this source thus linking the two codes in a round about way. However even these adopted laws were sanctified, the Hebrew motive was always a moral one and their code contained a spirit of kindness which was lacking in the others. The prophetic influence was also unique with the Hebrews. The whole law

was ethicized. Widowhood had been a disgrace but under the influence of the prophets the public conscience was stimulated into making the widow a public word. Equal rights were given to resident aliens; Slaves were permitted wide extending rights; sacred prostitution and human sacrifice were prohibited. In its development the Hebrew law was largely independent of the direct influence of any of the ~~other~~ codes under discussion.

Chapter III "Origin of Hebrew God."

"Religion may be defined as man's belief that there is that in his environment which is greater than himself, and upon which he feels to some degree dependant, and with which he accordingly attempts to establish a relationship of mutual interest and good will." ^①

This is the origin, according to the author, of man's conception of God. With this as a basis he attempts his quest for the origin of the Hebrew God. Although some attention is paid to the development of the God conception and its essential elements among the Hebrews, most attention is given to the problem of the origin of the God Yahweh himself. It is this reviewer's opinion that the two issues are somewhat confused.

In characteristic fashion the author has the philological approach even to the origin of the God conception. The earliest names for God had to do with strength: "strong one" "mountain" "firm". Man first felt his dependance upon that in his environment which was strong. The religious experience was one of fear. The phenomena of nature were clarified. This approach seems to insist, unlike the approach in "Culture and Conscience" by Graham and May, that haterism was a precursor to animism. Each in its own way seems to be a logical approach. Of necessity the problem must remain in the field of speculation however, and the two sources are so interwoven that it really makes little difference. The point here is that this element of man's religious experience

① T. J. Meek "Hebrew Origins" p. 77

was maintained in the Hebrew conception.

The next step was ancestor worship. Death was so mysterious a thing that it called for worship. Primitive man knew life not death, therefore he looked upon it as a continuance of life. The dead must be tended. Because they were thought of as living on in the spirit they came to be remembered and even deified. This element also remains in old Testament writings. Graves and places of worship were often found close to each other.

As society developed and the clan emerged, clan ancestors were worshipped. A clan deity evolved. As tribes confederated they selected a common name for their deity.

This development is used for a background against which the origin of Yahweh is discussed. It is the reviewer's opinion that it is not nearly as comprehensive as some other discussions along this line. However it is not essentially the author's problem at the moment.

The old Testament is most confusing in its notion of the origin of Yahweh. An early popular notion, derived from a study of the old Testament was that he was the tribal god of the Kenites and was taken over by the other Hebrew tribes at the time of the confederacy. This theory is well supported by many stories in the old Testament. Even if it is true it doesn't solve the problem of the origin for post tribal society. Likely He was the tribal god of one of the clans but whence ~~how~~ did he come there?

Some critics believe they have found the solution in a god who appears in early Canaanite literature. Perhaps the god Ea can be equated with Yah? Professor Mack is not ready to accept this position however. It never appears in the Canaanite literature of the Akkadians for one thing and its character is so different from that of Yah that their likeness in name must be co-incidental.

It cannot be proven conclusively that the short form of writing Yahweh appears in any literature earlier than the eighth century B.C. The full name appears nowhere, with two exceptions except in old Testament writings. It never

appears as an element in names until later times. As the Exodus story suggests the name in its long form may have originated with Moses therefore. Yahweh might be the explanation of a divine name given to Moses in a new revelation. In giving the old God a new name he might have given him a new nature. Yahweh can be read as an abbreviation of a phrase meaning "He that causes to be that which comes to pass". It is an old God with an added interpretation of an Egyptian flavour which Moses might easily have brought to it. Certainly as the scriptures were ethicized the name Yahweh displaced the shorter forms.

This notion formed by the Exodus writer, sounds to some extent, artificial. His explanation seems to be especially vague and perhaps intentionally so. There is a great deal of evidence for the fact that Yahweh has its root in the Arabic. It may have come from a non Hebrew root and mistakenly rationalized, in later times, as being a form of the verb to be. Certainly the Exodus writing confusing would substantiate this claim.

It is professor Meek's contention that the notion of the foreign origin is the most sound one. Most scholars are of the opinion that its roots are in the verb "hawah" - to blow. He was originally a storm God. In the earliest known Biblical writings, Yahweh is referred to as the storm God. It is a logical conclusion to come to, taking into consideration the origin of the God conception for most people. From Natunism the God conception developed into a tribalism. Deity became anthropomorphic as he followed the clan around.

It is evident that this transformation from nature to tribal gods took place among all the clans who went to make the confederacy. Yahweh became the tribal God of one of them and at confederation became the God of the confederacy. As the southern confederacy dominated the north He became the national God. All evidence points to Jericho as the tribe who brought Yahwism with it.

It was a southern tribe and therefore were in a position to adopt the Yahweh cult whose origin was most likely Arabia. It is the only tribe whose members, at this early date, have names containing elements of the name Yahweh. "Judah" itself may be derived from it. It was the dominant tribe of the southern confederacy and therefore its god would naturally become the god of the covenant. It was the south who dominated the north and therefore it would be the god of this confederacy who became the national god. Only by this time in Hebrew history do we see names beginning to appear which contain elements of "Yahweh". Furthermore when a small section of this tribe broke off and set up a kingdom in Samaria it was under a king whose name contains an element of "Yahweh". All evidence points to the fact that it was Judah which was responsible for bringing Yahweism to the fore in Hebrew religious history.

Judah was the first, as the Levites were absorbed they took over the cult of their dominant confederate. Moses was a convert by marriage. As he brought with him the Levites they amalgamated under a covenant relationship with Yahweh. This must have taken place at Kadesh just prior to the invasion of Palestine. Because the invasion was successful and because this confederacy came to dominate even the northern confederacy, the cult of Yahweh was firmly entrenched.

Chapter IV

Origin of Hebrew Priesthood

The chapter opens with a discussion of the general development of the priesthood among peoples. The first priests were mediators. Some people were recognized as having special mystic powers. As society evolved the functions of the priesthood did likewise. First was the tribe and then the city state as the tribe settled on the land. The king or chief was the chief priest. He was to the state as the father was to the family. As man's conception of his environment became more complex the machinery for controlling it also became more complicated. A specialist indeed was required. Kings

duties increased later so that the king had to delegate his priestly functions. They grew up an official state priesthood contemporary with this development there remained what can be termed as the popular priesthood which was not necessarily state-controlled.

In some cases in the history of a nation's priesthood, it was true of a whole tribe that it took over the national functions. As is true of the Magi, a tribe whose political aspirations in a confederacy were foiled, sometimes took over the field of religion. Professor Meek believes that this is true also of the Kenites with reference to the rise of the Hebrew Priesthood.

The Kenites were originally a tribe and not a professional caste. It seems very likely that they had as their tribal god, the serpent deity, Nahash. This is evident from the name of the tribe itself, and the story of Moses' rod, and the raising of the serpent in the wilderness. Archaeological discoveries in Palestine also show that this serpent cult was popular there. When the tribe of Keni came into the southern confederacy they attempted political domination under Simeon. When they saw that they were to be absorbed by Judah they championed the cause of the stronger tribe and took over the priestly functions of the Yahweh cult. That they should be welcomed in this capacity by the other tribes is not strange when we consider how the oriental mind always attached mystery to strangers and great powers to their magic. This tribe carried with it many elements of the serpent cult even down to the time of the Prophets. From being a secular tribe it became the ~~secular~~ ^{religious} order of another tribe.

As the two confederacies met there came a conflict between this priesthood and the priesthood of the north. Here they met the dominant cultus of the north which seems to be a Bull cultus. Mr. Meek seems to think that it was not necessarily a Canaanite cultus. It was the god of the dominant tribe of Ephraim and did have some connection with the Canaanite fertility cult as its name was interchangeable with the Canaanite Adad. Yahwehism came late here. Not until the time of David is it evident. The hidden stories might be an indication

of the faint beginnings of its adoption here and Saul may have been an early convert but the dominant cult was that of the Bull. Even when the change did come it was just in name. Elements of the fertility cult certainly remained until a much later date.

Out of what little he knows of this problem, this reviewer would venture to ask where there is evidence that the other cults, that of Yahweh as well as that of Hahash were not also fertility cults, native to Canaan or at least part of the Catholic pattern of the whole Near East.

Whatever its essential nature, however, the Yahweh cult came to be the dominant one in the nation. With this the Levite priesthood came also to dominate. Finally, when David, the champion of Yahweh, defeated the Philistines, the domination of the Yahweh cult was secured. This left the Levites in the saddle.

If anything can be said of the Book as a whole, that is, as the first four chapters, let it be this. As has been said the author has definitely the philological approach and it is certainly interesting what can come out of such an approach. The nature and treatment of the problems are beyond anyone but a scholar. That is, an intelligent criticism of them. Some of the main issues and certainly an appreciation of the complexity of the problems can be grasped. It is the opinion of this reviewer however that the author is here dealing with technical problems which although necessary, are not essential. This is not to decry his work but the nature of his task in the first place.