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The Origins of the People of Israel

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The Tyndale Old Testament Lecture for 1969, delivered at a meeting of the Old Testament Group of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research by the Warden of Tyndale House.

The scope of this essay will be quite narrow, for all the apparent breadth of the title. I shall make no comment on the Habiru, nor on the Terahite migration; nor, again, on Ezekiel's taunt to Jerusalem, 'Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite' (Ezk. 16: 45). My sole concern will be with the question whether Israel was basically a family sired by the patriarchs, or a group of peoples thrown together by history and bound together by religion.

I. THE TRADITIONAL ACCOUNT: the growth of the one into the many

The Israelite was very conscious of his origins. In prosperity they were his corrective to pride, as he recited the story of 'A wandering Aramean' who became a nation of slaves, rescued by the grace of God (Dt. 26: 5ff.). And in adversity he was roused by such a call as 'Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him and made him many' (Is. 51: 2). This theme of the one and the many was more than a priest's or a prophet's set piece, for Ezekiel found it on everyone's lips (Ezk. 33: 24); and if it was no better than a shallow slogan in his day, at least it proves to us the hold of

this outline of history on the thinking of the learned and unlearned alike in Israel.

But the Old Testament does not pretend that the outline is the whole story. Within the frame of the 'one' who became 'many' there is a picture of some complexity. The patriarchal family, for instance, is shown surrounded by a considerable entourage, whether it is Abram's 318 retainers (Gn. 14: 14), Isaac's 'great household' (26: 14) or Jacob's 'two companies' (32: 7) and his subsequent haul of captives from Shechem (34: 29). Again at the Exodus there is said to be a 'mixed multitude' with Israel (Ex. 12: 38; cf. Nu. 11: 4), besides the more compact affiliations of clans which remained conscious of their identity as Kenites from Midian (Nu. 10: 29-32; cf. Jdg. 1: 16),¹ or Kenizites from Edom (Gn. 36: 11; Nu. 13: 6; 32: 12), or again as Jerahmeelites, of the kindred of Caleb,² while counting as full members and even leaders within their adoptive community. At later stages, with the conquest and eventually the monarchy, whole groups such as the Gibeonites in Joshua's day, and the Jebusites in David's, found their way into the Israelite society.

The Old Testament, then, is not describing a river without tributaries when it speaks of a nation springing from a single pair. But neither is it telling of a confluence of equal streams. The slender lineage of Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, is always central. If a modern historian finds the portrait of Abram the clan chieftain strangely at variance with that of Abram the childless,³ Genesis has already stressed the paradox of it, highlighting his distress at possessing everything but the son on whom the promises depend. His outburst, 'What wilt thou give me, for I continue childless' (Gn. 15: 2), is placed hard after the exploit of the men 'born in his house' (Gn. 14: 14), as if to clinch the fact that nothing whatever will reconcile him to having a mere 'son of the household' (cf. 15: 3) as his heir. This large establishment, it is implied, had indeed its part to play in making the patriarchal group a viable entity, but was nothing without its living core, the actual stock of Abraham. These descendants would draw in foreigners in marriage (indeed the only wives known to us in the circle of Jacob's sons happen to be a Canaanite and an Egyptian; and there is Manasseh's Aramean concubine in the next generation, 1 Ch. 7: 14), but the family identity was to remain clearly marked and its relationship accurately remembered.

The point of recalling these details, which lie openly on the surface of the narratives, is to ensure that the Old Testament account is not burdened for us with gratuitous problems through our mistaking its summaries for its full story. It will be my contention that the standard biblical account, as long as it is read in its own terms, is beset with far fewer difficulties than the alternatives which we now have to consider.

II. OBJECTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES TO THIS TRADITION

In the main, the objections are twofold. The first is general: that, as a matter of observation, nations do not simply originate from a single source. The second is particular: that the biblical material itself points to a prehistory of Israel which is at variance with the editorial scheme.

1. The question of probability

The first objection was well expressed by R. Kittel, as follows: '... no nation known to us in history can be traced back to a single progenitor. The spaces of time that intervene between the progenitor or progenitors and the nation are always too vast, and the complications and tribal mixtures too varied and numerous to allow of the development being traced back to those ancestors.'⁴

We may agree at once with this as a general proposition. But the fallacy of applying it directly to Israel is that this people is never made out to be simply the inhabitants of a particular area. Analogies to its evolution are to be sought, not in the rise of nations, but in the great historical movements pioneered by individuals — for this was Israel's primary understanding of herself: not as an immemorial ethnic entity but as a breakaway group with a call as clear-cut and dateable (in principle) as that of the Christian church or the Pilgrim Fathers. To this must be added its belief that its vocation was initially to propagate not its faith but itself, as God's means of eventual blessing to the world.

It is consistent with such a call that in its early stage this 'cell' (as we might call it) should have its identity carefully preserved, first by its semi-nomadic way of life and later by its migration *en bloc* to make a foreign enclave in Egypt. Up to this point, its growth in five generations to a nominal total of seventy (representing, say, 140 with the inclusion of wives and daughters)⁵ is nothing remarkable. Nor is there anything to cavil at in its tradition of survival and expansion in Egypt, since in 430 years⁶ a quite modest rate of increase⁷ could have produced a population of fully 20,000, while a fairly rapid rate (an average of, say, six children to a family) could well have yielded a million or more — a figure with problems of its own,⁸ but certainly large enough to dispel any doubts that a clan, helped, as Israel was, by some miscegenation,⁹ could grow into a formidable people in this time.

In itself, then, the traditional outline makes sense. This does not prove its historicity, but it puts some onus on an alternative scheme to show itself at least as coherent and as faithful to the evidence as the one it would displace.

2. Arguments from particular data

We turn now to a range of theories which, while they differ considerably in detail, agree in viewing Israel as an amalgam of various groups which found

or fought their way into Canaan at different times, where they eventually united in allegiance to Yahweh, and experienced so strong a unity, perhaps at their periodic gatherings (which have been likened to those of the Greek and Italian amphictyonies),¹⁰ that the history of each came to be accepted as the history of all. Three separate cult-founders of certain constituent-groups, according to an influential theory,¹¹ were now adopted as common ancestors of the whole league, by an unconscious master-stroke of quasi-ecumenical diplomacy which grafted them on to a single stock as father, son and grandson, while their respective deities, denied the advantages of a trinity, melted into one Yahweh. Those few tribes which had experienced Egypt and the Red Sea made room in their memories for the encounter with Yahweh which others had enjoyed at Sinai,¹² while those that were long established in Palestine contrived to think their former selves into Egypt and back again with the Exodus group.

This merger of separate histories, some of them concerning matters of living memory at the time postulated for the union of tribes, presumes a curiously modern unconcern over family traditions (co-existing with a fully ancient tenacity in preserving genealogies), and presupposes a cordiality and an ease of communication between the scattered tribes which are hard to reconcile with the book of Judges. These are formidable difficulties. They call, one may feel, for very cogent arguments to accommodate them.

The main thrust of such arguments is that the biblical material itself is at odds with the editorial framework. This conflict is considered to arise in four main areas: chronology, the settlement in Canaan, the structure of Israel, and the Sinai tradition.

a. Chronology. The tension here is chiefly between the brevity of the genealogies and the length of those periods that are measured in years in the Old Testament, both before and after the Exodus. One way of resolving the tension is to assume that the different time-lengths should be applied to different groups, with the implication that Israel was not a unity until it became one in Canaan. Among many who have favoured this argument, H. H. Rowley expounded it at length in his 1948 Schweich Lectures, where he treated the four centuries in Egypt (Gn. 15: 13; Ex. 12: 40) as irreconcilable with the genealogy which appears to place Levi only two or three generations before Moses (Ex. 6: 16, 18, 20), and with parallel genealogies to the same effect.¹³ For the post-Exodus period he cited the well-known discrepancy (if such it is) between the 480 years of 1 Kings 6: 1 and the six generations that appear to separate Aaron's brother-in-law Nahshôn from Solomon.¹⁴

Rowley was aware of the possible reply that the genealogies are selective rather than exhaustive, but rejected it without pausing to discuss in any detail

the conventions that may have governed such records.¹⁵ These can be studied, however, readily enough, both within and without the Bible. For biblical practice one has only to recall the first verse of the New Testament, where three names span almost two millennia, or the ensuing schematized list of three fourteens in Matthew 1: 2-17;¹⁶ while for extra-biblical genealogies one can point (as Albright reminds us) to widespread evidence of a similar tendency to abbreviation in this *genre*.¹⁷ Most of Albright's examples are from cultures remote in time or place from ancient Israel, yet no more remote than our own civilization, to whose patterns of thought they supply a corrective which should not be overlooked, in that their concern is not with numerical completeness or absolute chronology,¹⁸ but only, or chiefly, with the relation of a clan or clan-member to the founder of a lineage or subgroup¹⁹ and with identifying the main branches and sideshoots of the family tree.²⁰ But K. A. Kitchen has cited examples from Egypt which belong to the very context of early Israel, from contemporaries of Moses on to the eighth century; and these, too, are demonstrably selective, on the evidence of parallel, fuller genealogies.²¹

To the problem of the 480 years of 1 Kings 6: 1 between the Exodus and Solomon's temple, the theory of a multiple entry into Canaan is only one among several conceivable answers. Another is Th. Nöldeke's well-known suggestion²² that 480 is a stylized total for twelve generations²³ of the conventional forty years. If, further, it is considered to be flanked by two other symbolical periods of 480 years, first from the erection of Jacob's altar at Bethel to that of the tabernacle, and secondly from the founding of the first temple to that of the second, as narrated in Ezra 3: 8ff.,²⁴ this will be an additional pointer to a schematized chronology, akin to the three fourteens of Matthew 1 already mentioned.

This is inconclusive, to be sure; but whether or not one accepts this answer, it cannot be claimed that the chronological data leave us no alternative to adopting a theory of multiple movements into Canaan.

b. The settlement in Canaan. In this area, an artificial unity is thought to have been editorially forced upon data which really imply separate pre-histories for the separate tribes of Israel. There is space to discuss only a few examples: the first, from material outside the book of Joshua, the second from an area common to Joshua and Judges, and the third from Genesis.

i. Hormah. This city in the far south of Judah appears in Numbers 14: 45 as the scene of an Israelite defeat, and in Numbers 21: 1-3 and Judges 1: 16, 17 as the scene of two victories. Its name is twice attributed to the placing of a ban, or *chêrem*, on it, once in the days of Moses and once after the death of Joshua. On this, H. H. Rowley says: 'We

have two accounts of the destruction . . . Both . . . are unlikely to be true.²⁵ He points out (under the impression that this strengthens his case) the contrasts in time, leadership, the forces involved, and the direction of march, between the two reports; he thinks it 'most improbable that a successful campaign would have been followed by a withdrawal', and he concludes that probably 'we have here . . . the beginning of a movement by some of the tribes into the south in an age quite separate from that of Joshua'.²⁶

But this is quite unjustified. The book of Numbers makes it clear that the attack under Moses (and indeed this whole phase of Israel's journeying) was not designed to gain territory. Israel was on the march, and had recently requested peaceful passage through Edom, 'turning neither to the right hand nor to the left' (Nu. 20: 17). As Y. Kaufmann points out, the request of Reuben and Gad, a little later, to settle in the territory won from Sihon and Og was met at first with a scandalized refusal from Moses, to whom this was no part of the present task of Israel.²⁷ Any contradiction therefore between this passing reprisal and the settlement campaign a generation later has to be imposed on the biblical data; and the re-use of this material to turn Israel's reprisal into Judah's take-over, a southward march into a northward migration, and post-Joshua events into pre-Mosaic and indeed pre-Joseph ones,²⁸ is too high-handed to create a case for reinterpreting the existing account.

ii. **Judges 1 and the campaigns of Joshua.** It is almost a datum of biblical criticism that Judges 1 is an alternative, instead of a sequel, to the book of Joshua, preserving a tradition of piecemeal penetration of Canaan by tribes yet to be united. On this well-worn question it is perhaps enough to point out that there are competent scholars who find it over-facile to resolve the tension between Joshua and Judges by simply deleting the opening words of Judges 1.

G. E. Wright, for example, has shown that some of the contradictions diagnosed between Joshua and Judges were the product of early inaccuracies in identifying sites, which made nonsense of the good geography of the southward push described in Joshua 10.²⁹ Again, the evidence now available of cities destroyed and re-destroyed in this period has shown up the weakness of objecting (as though this kind of lightning could not strike twice) that the battles of Judges 1 could not have been fought already in Joshua. Wright retains, in other words, the crucial opening of Judges: 'After the death of Joshua. . .'.³⁰ He points out, further, the unsoundness of an exegesis which would set the Deuteronomist editor of Joshua, in his summarizing statements, at odds with his own insistence that the Canaanites continued in the land.³¹ This touch of sound sense prompts me to quote a characteristic aside by another author, K. A. Kitchen: ' . . . Joshua's

swift campaigns temporarily disabled a series of Canaanite city-states and were *not* (and not considered) an exhaustive conquest . . .; when (Jos. 10) "he left none remaining", common sense suggests that (like pedestrians on our roads) it is a question of "the quick and the dead"; whoever had not got away perished.³²

A quite independent line of argument is that of Y. Kaufmann,³³ who defends the account of a united Israelite army in Joshua by the reminder that against the Canaanites' technical assets Israel's only human advantage was unity — an asset threatened, however, by the land-hunger which would tempt different sections to fall prematurely out of the campaign. Hence the realism of Joshua's resolve to keep his army in camp, not occupying a single city; hence, too, the need of further operations to 'possess their possessions' after the general victory.

Kaufmann reinforces his point elsewhere³⁴ by drawing careful distinctions between the changing military aims of Israel recorded for the three periods between Moses and Solomon. These objectives he classifies as first *conquest*, with a land-seeking interest (from the campaign against Sihon in Nu. 21 to the tribal offensives of Jdg. 1); then *liberation*, mostly from oppressors other than Canaanites, after the early campaign of Judges 4 and 5 (Jdg. 3 - 1 Sa. 31); finally *domination*, an exercise of power rather than of land-hunger or religious zeal (2 Sa. 1 - 1 Ki. 11). There is an impressive self-consistency of the records from this point of view, and all the more so in that it lies somewhat hidden from casual view. It is the kind of fingerprint that is left by a genuine tradition, as distinct from a medley of aetiological material.

iii. **Traditions of the twelve tribes.** It is usually assumed without argument that tribal movements lie behind the stories of the sons of Jacob. From this it is a short step to concluding that at least Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, who figure in events in Canaan in Genesis, were settled in the land as tribes, long before they were joined by others from Egypt. This assumption needs to be looked at.

A second approach to consider is M. Noth's argument, from the forms of the names, that Judah, Ephraim, Naphtali, Benjamin and Issachar were named after the territory or way of life which they adopted in Canaan, and had therefore had no clear identity or mutual relationship before they met on this soil.³⁵

In reply to Noth (to take the second of these first), J. Bright has pointed out the lack of any proof that the first three of these tribes *owed* rather than gave their names to their localities or that the Benjamites did not bring their name with them; he also remarks that Issachar (hired man) is an unlikely nickname for a tribe undergoing forced labour (Gn. 49: 15), since the two conditions are hardly synonymous.³⁶

I would wish to go further, and ask why these

names could not have been given to the actual sons of Jacob.

Judah is admittedly (as far as I know³⁷) an unexplained form for a personal name; but nothing is proved by the city-names *ygbhh* (Nu. 32: 35; Jdg. 8: 11) and *yd'lh* (Jos. 19: 15), which Noth adduces as morphological parallels,³⁸ since they need drastic re-vocalizing to show any similarity to *yhw dh*, and the Septuagint offers no support in this direction with its *Iegebal* (B) or *Zeebe* (A) and its *Iereichō* (B) or *Iadēla* (A) in these contexts. If, however, Albright is correct in classifying Judah as 'properly a collective noun',³⁹ for which he suggested the meanings of the 'guided' or perhaps the 'consecrated' people, it seems at least possible that, as with Benjamin (as we shall see), a collective name in current use was taken, played upon with a new meaning ('praise'), and used as a personal name. Nor should we forget the influence of the promise on the patriarchs, which could well encourage them to see their sons as founding members of a great nation (cf. Gn. 28: 14; 49: 1ff.), from whom whole communities would take their titles.

Ephraim does indeed suggest a place-name, to judge by its ending in *-ayim*. But if an author or editor could acceptably give a punning twist to fit an existing name to a family situation, there seems no reason why a parent should not take a similar liberty, as the Old Testament repeatedly implies. Why should not Joseph, far from home, commemorate both his fruitfulness and, perhaps, his homeland, in the name Ephraim; or Jacob replace the name Benoni with *Benjamin*, 'son of the right hand' — one that was not only apt and auspicious but already current elsewhere in its other sense of 'sons of the south'? Again, on *Naphtali* Noth has no alternative to the 'wrestlings' of Genesis 30: 8 to offer, and admits that in the tradition Mount Naphtali is named after its inhabitants;⁴⁰ while as for *Issachar*, we may well agree with Bright that the name is none too appropriate to the tribe's later history, and may go on to conclude that the pun on hiring is poignantly in key with the family tensions and stratagems of Genesis 29 and 30. Other personal names from this root are attested in a slave list of the eighteenth century BC.⁴¹

Turning now to the stories in Genesis about Dinah, Simeon and Levi, Reuben and Bilhah, Judah and Tamar, we can hardly fail to notice the lively portraiture in the longer narratives here — which is surprising if the characters are mere personifications. Indeed, since all three incidents concern people whose births have been circumstantially recorded, and whose personalities emerge again in the Joseph stories, one would think that the burden of proof rested on those who reject the individual sense for a collective one. Speaking of the confrontation between Hamor and Jacob in Genesis 34, J. Pedersen remarks, 'It is strange that none of the commentators seem to remember that this is the very manner

in which a man prefers his suit in the Orient as well as elsewhere on the globe. The whole . . . scene stands out so vividly and clearly that one seems to be face to face with a narrative of the Bedouins or Fellahs of the present day.'⁴²

It is only fair to point out that some recent scholars are aware of the resistance which these narratives offer to a collective interpretation, although they are reluctant to abandon it. Von Rad is noticeably ambiguous, holding on the one hand that 'ultimately all the various traditions of Jacob's twelve sons go back to this cultic arrangement (viz. the amphictyony) in the period of the Judges',⁴³ yet warning us, on the other hand, against reading the birth records of Genesis 29 and 30 as 'disguised tribal history. . . The narrative' (he insists) 'is not about tribes, even personified tribes, but about men.'⁴⁴ In dealing with the massacre at Shechem he appears to be equally in two minds. Writing on Genesis 34 he states that the tribes of Simeon and Levi 'by some catastrophe (*sic*) . . . were pushed out of the territory around Shechem'.⁴⁵ Yet in commenting on 49: 5-7 he concedes that 'whether the tribe of Simeon suffered a "catastrophe" in the vicinity of Shechem, as is often assumed, is beyond our knowledge'.⁴⁶

On Reuben's incest, the same author candidly admits the obscurity of the tribal interpretation, remarking that 'if what is said in verse 4 (of Gn. 49) about the ancestor contains some recollection of a severe crime committed by the tribe of Reuben, it is completely incomprehensible to us. . .'.⁴⁷

On the third of the examples, Judah's incest with Tamar, von Rad is again aware of the tension between the alternative ways of reading the story, neither of which he will abandon. In his view, the conclusion of Genesis 38 (the birth of Perez and Zerah, whose families were to become clans within the parent tribe, Judah) left the ancient reader with 'no other possibility at all except that of connecting what is here related with historical tribal conditions of his time, *i.e.*, of understanding it as aetiology, as previous history of internal Judaean lines'. To this, incidentally, we may fully assent without acknowledging any need to collectivize the tribal *ancestors* — a process which gratuitously creates the absurdities to which von Rad's next remarks draw attention. For he continues: 'It would be barbarism to try to interpret everything in this story from an ethnological viewpoint, for then something of its essence would be misunderstood, namely, its wonderful openness to what is human — passions, guilt, paternal anxiety, love, honour, chivalry, all churning up the narrow circle of one family in labyrinthine entanglement!'⁴⁸

A. S. Herbert points out another aspect of the dilemma when he concludes a summary of the aetiological understandings of the chapter, which he advocates, with the admission: 'What is difficult to understand is why this should be presented in so scandalous a form.' He can only suggest that 'per-

haps the ancient tradition was presented in this form as a vigorously expressed parable'.⁴⁹

The hypothesis, in fact, begins to pose more problems than it solves, and thereby loses (one would think) its *raison d'être*. It was in any case somewhat gratuitous, first because at several points its interpretation of a given story discarded the plainer sense for a confessedly obscurer one (and there is no warrant for extending one's preference for *difficilior lectio* to an insistence on *difficilior interpretatio*); but secondly and more seriously because it adopted this course not on the strength of the text but in support of a postulated pre-history of Israel to which the text at its face-value would be fatal. This is not exegesis but, at the least, eisegesis. One is tempted, in terms of 2 Peter 3: 16, to call it neither of these, but *streblōsis*, distortion.

c. The structure of Israel. I have already touched on the suggested reinterpretation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as cult-founders 'originally . . . quite unrelated one to another',⁵⁰ and have pointed out how hard this is to reconcile with what is known of the settlement situation. The short-lived and localized bursts of common action in the days of the Judges, the half-hearted response to a general summons (except when the call was gruesomely reinforced, as in Jdg. 19: 29f.), and the succession of savage feuds, are all symptoms of a union that has fallen on bad days, rather than of one that is in its first flush of enthusiasm, such as we are required to assume on the view that the members were taking even each other's ancestors to their hearts, against all their memories and all the facts.

It is not enough to appeal to the bonds of an amphictyony to account for this group-consciousness; still less to the hypothesis of monthly turns of sanctuary-duty to explain the twelve-tribe structure of Israel.⁵¹ This non-Semitic institution has had to bear a quite excessive weight of Old Testament analogy, being regarded in some quarters (as G. Fohrer has pointed out)⁵² as almost more crucial for Israel's history than Yahwism itself.

The chief proponent of the theory, M. Noth, admits that we have no certain knowledge of the nature and purpose of an amphictyony in ancient Greece,⁵³ and although he can point to a strong preference for a membership of twelve, the exceptions (such as Kalauria with seven,⁵⁴ or the league of thirty Latin peoples)⁵⁵ show that the calendar was by no means determinative of the pattern. Fohrer has reminded us that there are other reasons than administrative ones for the prominence of twelves in the ancient world,⁵⁶ and B. D. Rahtjen can point to the five cities of the Philistines (a non-Semitic people, one may note from the Aegean) as a closer approximation to an amphictyony than the Israelite brotherhood, which can only bear such a title in its most general sense.⁵⁷ It is surely significant that the very word amphictyony has no Hebrew equivalent, whereas the Old Testament has no lack of terms for

other institutions that are supposedly less central. Fohrer, in making this point, emphasizes that the name Israel is no substitute for the term, compounded as it is, not with the name Yahweh (as would befit a group explicitly centred on His cult), but with the ambiguous appellative El.⁵⁸

As for the decisive role of the sanctuary, we may quote the pertinent comment of H. M. Orlinsky, that 'one will go through all the 21 chapters of the book of Judges, and fail to find mention of Shiloh, or Shechem, or Bethel, or Ramah, or Beth-shean, or Gilgal, or any other shrine, at which a confederacy of two, or six, or twelve, or any number of tribes met as an amphictyony'.⁵⁹ Certainly the ark was at Bethel in Judges 20: 18ff., and Israel sought counsel of God there; but their rallying point, as Orlinsky observes, had been elsewhere, namely at Mizpah (Jdg. 20 :1).

More positively, there is good reason to see in Israel's traditional designation of itself as primarily a 'people' (*m*) and only secondarily a nation (*gwy*), an implied consciousness that the ties of blood relationship, not of federal union, were fundamental to its structure. G. Fohrer, in the article referred to above, takes the lists of Jacob's twelve sons as evidence that Israel regarded itself from the earliest days of the settlement in Canaan as a blood-bonded people (*m*) descended from a common ancestor.⁶⁰ E. A. Speiser, writing on "People" and "Nation" of Israel⁶¹ has shown that the words *m* and *gwy* are very clearly differentiated, with *gwy* a somewhat impersonal term as against the more clan-orientated word *m*. He contrasts the predominantly urban society reflected in Akkadian social terms with Israel's emphasis on kinship (discernible in the preference for *m* and *'ys* over *gwy* and *'dm*), and emphasis carried over from her formative nomadic period.

The promise of Genesis 12: 2, he reminds us, was that God would *make* her a nation (*gwy*), but her first status was that of a family. The terms, in fact, that are the very stuff of Old Testament language add their incidental support to its story of origins.⁶²

d. The Sinai tradition. We have already looked at the argument from chronology for a series of movements into Canaan, as against the single Exodus of the normative record. We now turn to the argument that the Sinai episode was only experienced by a section of Israel, one which did not come to Canaan via the Red Sea. The corollary of this is, of course, that the groups were not united until they reached Canaan, which they entered from various quarters.

The isolation of the Sinai tradition as an intrusive element in the Exodus story is a long-standing feature of Old Testament criticism, in spite of some dissentient voices.⁶³ Wellhausen argued for it on the characteristic ground that the first smiting of the rock at the place of Testing (Massah) and Strife (Meribah; Ex. 17: 7) on the way to Sinai must be a doublet of the smiting at the second place of Strife

(the second Meribah) near Kadesh in Numbers 20. He contended that the incident should belong to Kadesh, to which Israel had therefore proceeded straight from the Red Sea. Hence Sinai was a separate tradition, brought into the narrative as a *détour* at the first convenient point. All this rests on the assumption that the possibility of two similar events leaving their names on two desert places, is too remote to be worth discussing — even though the traditions are concerned with a *recurrent* pre-occupation of any desert journey, the supply of water.

From another angle Gressmann⁶⁴ in 1913 gave fresh support to the theory by an aetiological study of Marah, Massah and Meribah, all of which he traced to Kadesh, whose various springs gave rise to a multiplicity of place-sagas. His conclusions, however, seem scarcely less miraculous than the springs themselves, since they issue from material that appears quite inadequate to produce them. Marah (Ex. 15: 22-26) is transferred to Kadesh on the basis of such fragments as the mention of 'a statute and an ordinance' (Ex. 15: 25), and of God's 'testing' of Israel (*ibid.*) — for 'testing' suggests Massah, regardless of the fact that Israel is said to have tested *God* there, whereas God tested *Israel* at Marah. Even the possible pun between *mārā*, 'bitter' and *mārā* 'to rebel' (Nu. 20: 10, *ham-mōrīm*) is pressed into service — for the whole argument is conjured out of fragments; even, in part, out of lacunae. An example of the latter is in Gressmann's reconstruction of the J recension of the Meribah story, whereby Moses is told to await God at a certain rock. 'Now', continues Gressmann, 'Yahweh must have appeared and struck the water from the rock Himself; this part is missing (*dies Stück fehlt*).'⁶⁵

Both Wellhausen and Gressmann failed to prove their case, in my opinion; but von Rad opened up in 1938⁶⁶ another route to the main conclusion by isolating a Settlement Tradition, rehearsed at Gilgal at the Feast of Weeks, from a Sinai Tradition which formed the cult-legend of the Feast of Booths at Shechem.

What concerns us here is that the so-called *credo*, which von Rad considered to play an important part in the Settlement Tradition, rehearsed the salient facts of Israel's history from the patriarchs to the deliverance from Egypt and the entry into Canaan, yet made no mention of Sinai. Its most primitive form he considered to be that of the first-fruits confession in Deuteronomy 26: 5b-9, and its outline remained constant, that of a miniature Hexateuch. But whatever embellishments it received, it still omitted Sinai. Not until the post-exilic prayer of Nehemiah 9 and the late Psalm 106 does Sinai appear. From this, the conclusion is drawn that Sinai played no part in the chain of events that led from Egypt via the Red Sea to the promised land. Von Rad considers that its insertion into the pilgrimage route was the work of the Yahwist — a fine

tempering of Redemption by Law.⁶⁷

But the argument from 'credos' needs closer scrutiny. When von Rad alludes to 'a whole series of compositions in which the narrative starts from the patriarchal period, but yet knows nothing of the events of Sinai', he identifies these in a footnote as Deuteronomy 26: 5ff.; Joshua 24: 2ff.; 1 Samuel 12: 8; Psalm 105.⁶⁸ On this I would comment as follows:

(i) The term *credo*, used frequently in the essay, begs a question,⁶⁹ for the four passages that are cited profess to be respectively (a) a form prescribed for an individual's initial offering of firstfruits on entering the promised land, (b) a parting address by Joshua, (c) a parting address by Samuel, and (d) a Psalm with no occasion specified. There is no obligation, in these situations, as there would be in a creed, to present a normative summary of the faith.

(ii) The analysis proves too much, for three of the four passages fail to mention even the Red Sea and the first of them omits Moses; yet both of these items are integral to the Settlement Tradition.

(iii) The emphasis and main concern vary from passage to passage, and are the chief factors that determine the selection of events. *I.e.*,

(a) In *Deuteronomy 26* the theme is 'from poverty to plenty'. The Sinai covenant would therefore be a digression.

(b) In *Joshua 24* the emphasis is on other nations and other gods, over against the incomparable Lord. Sinai would not have been irrelevant here, but the canvas is crowded instead with Yahweh's victories over gods and nations, to reinforce His appeal for Israel's sole allegiance. So the climax, which does indeed contain an allusion to the Sinai decalogue, confines this to a reminder that the Lord is a jealous God who will not excuse disloyalty (24: 19).

(c) In *1 Samuel 12* the theme is the raising up of deliverers in answer to a cry for help. Here Sinai would be totally irrelevant to the contrast between saviours and kings.

(d) In *Psalm 105* the theme is God's 'marvellous works'. As it is, the poem ends with the pointed reminder that Israel enjoyed all these 'to the end that they should keep his statutes and observe his laws'. We are hard to please if we can see no trace of Sinai here.

Incidentally the 'late passages' which do include Mount Sinai do so with a similar regard for their main concerns. Thus Psalm 106 dwells on Israel's sin, and its only allusion to Sinai is to the golden calf — not the law or the covenant. Von Rad's other late example, Nehemiah 9, has the twin foci of God's land and God's laws, and chooses its material accordingly. Its mention of covenant is therefore not of the Sinai covenant, but of the Abrahamic, with its pledge of the land. Sinai is cited rather for its laws, which Israel has broken and has therefore forfeited both land and liberty.

In all these instances the absence of this item or

that is not a mark of its absence from a tradition; only of its lack of compelling relevance.

(iv) If we compare the Christian affirmations, we shall be struck by their somewhat similar silences. They omit not only the teaching ministry of Jesus (which has some analogy to Sinai and the Torah), but also the Lord's Supper and the new covenant which was announced at its inauguration. The New Testament recitals of Gospel events keep to their chosen emphases, as do their Old Testament counterparts. So Philippians 2: 5-11 selects the points that bear on our Lord's humbling, 1 Corinthians 15: 3ff. on His resurrection, 1 Timothy 3: 16 on His manifestation; while the sermons in Acts mostly concentrate on His death, resurrection and exaltation, which had given so unexpected and significant a climax to His remembered ministry.

III. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SUBJECT

We must take some note, finally of the bearing of these rival accounts of Israel's origins on the rest of Scripture.

It can hardly be called a side-issue. The promise of a son to Abraham, not an adopted heir but emphatically 'your own son', dominates Genesis up to the moment when the birth of that son introduces the next stage of choice and tension; and always it keeps in view the creation of a people for the blessing of the world. On this point Abraham believes God and finds righteousness; through this son, 'born according to the spirit' (Gal. 4: 29), the people of God duly come into being; in the next generation God chooses the younger son Jacob 'that God's purpose of election might continue' (Rom. 9: 11). So 'from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven' (Heb. 11: 12); above all, 'from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ' (Rom. 9: 5). These things are the warp and woof of Genesis — it would be in tatters without them — and of the Bible itself.

We may feel that as long as Israel somehow came into being, and Christ through Israel, it hardly matters how it happened. It would be wiser, however, to accept that what Scripture, from Genesis to the Epistles, finds significant *is* significant. And we may perhaps be additionally grateful that whatever prodigies of practical faith may be demanded of us 'who walk in the steps of . . . Abraham', Scripture at least spares us the almost acrobatic feats of suspended disbelief which are required by the hypothesis of clan adhering to clan virtually on impact, of tribes eager to digest each other's pasts; above all, of cult-founders who are not only redeployed in, so to speak, line astern, but so radically recreated that their whole story builds up its tensions and climaxes, human and theological, round births that never happened, choices that never arose, and situations that are a pious fantasy.

FOOTNOTES

¹ These mainly settled with Judah, but separate groups formed alliances elsewhere (Jdg. 4: 11, 17; 1 Sa. 16: 6).

² 1 Sa. 27: 10; 30: 29; 1 Ch. 2: 9, 42. Cf. F. Bruce, *NBD* (IVP, London), p. 606.

³ Cf. J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (SCM, London, 1960), p. 69.

⁴ *History of the Hebrews* (ET, Williams and Norgate, Edinburgh, 1895), I, p. 169.

⁵ Cf. Gn. 46: 26.

⁶ Ex. 12: 40, MT.

⁷ Such as a net annual increase of 1.1%, which was the average figure for 26 countries between 1906-11 according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica XIV* (1929), vol. 18, p. 231, calculated to yield a doubling of population every 60 years.

⁸ See J. W. Wenham, 'The Large Numbers of the Old Testament', *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967), pp. 19-53.

⁹ Cf. Moses' Midianite and Cushite wives (Ex. 2: 21; Nu. 12: 1) and such names as Phinehas ('The Nubian'); cf. also Lv. 24: 10.

¹⁰ See, e.g., M. Noth, *Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels* (Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1930), especially pp. 47-121.

¹¹ A. Alt, 'Der Gott der Väter', *BWANT* III. 12 (1929)=*KS* I (Beck, Munich, 1959), pp. 1-78. The isolation of the patriarchs from one another is, however, a long-standing feature of pentateuchal criticism. Cf., e.g., Wellhausen: '(Abraham) is perhaps the youngest figure in the company . . .', *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (ET, A. and C. Black, Edinburgh, 1885), p. 320.

¹² Cf., e.g., M. Noth, *The History of Israel*² (Black, 1960), pp. 133f., 137f.

¹³ H. H. Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua* (British Academy, London, 1950), pp. 71f., 164.

¹⁴ Cf. Ex. 6: 23; Ru. 4: 20-22. See, however, 1 Ch. 6: 3-8 (5: 29-34, Heb.) and note ²³, below.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 72f.

¹⁶ Cf. M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies* (CUP, 1969), pp. 189-208.

¹⁷ W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*² (1963), p. 9. For additional anthropological material, see the bibliographical note in A. Malamat, 'King Lists of the Old Babylonian Period and Biblical Genealogies', *JAOS* 88 (1968), p. 163, n.5.

¹⁸ Cf., on the Bwili and Shila, I. Cunison, 'History and Genealogies in a Conquest State', *American Anthropologist* 59 (1957), p. 22. Albright draws attention to this article, and to that of R. C. Suggs, *idem* 62 (1960), where see especially pp. 767, 772 on the large errors that arise from calculating absolute dates by Polynesian genealogies, as though the latter represented in a single scheme both 'sociological and biological reality' (p. 772).

¹⁹ Cunison, *art. cit.*, p. 23.

²⁰ Cf. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1940), p. 199: 'The names of these founders of lineage-branches must go into the line somewhere, and in a definite order, because they are the significant points of reference. It is immaterial whether other names go in or not. . . .'

²¹ K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, London, 1966), p. 55. Kitchen also points out that Amram and Jochebed appear from Nu. 3: 27f. to mark the clan, not the immediate parentage, of Moses (*ibid.*, pp. 54f.).

²² 'Die Chronologie der Richterzeit', *Untersuchungen zur Kritik des AT* (1896), pp. 173-198 (cited by Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 97n., 180), where Nöldeke offers a more elaborate alternative as well.

²³ Cf. LXX's 440 years here, perhaps to correspond to the eleven high priests from Aaron to Zadok in 1 Ch. 6: 3-8 (5: 29-34, Heb.); so J. Gray, *I and II Kings* (SCM, London, 1964), p. 150. Some such number of generations would tally with the probable period of c. 300 years indicated by absolute chronology: cf. J. Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

²⁴ Cf. C. de Wit, *The Date and Route of the Exodus* (Tyndale Press, London, 1960), p. 8; J. Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 150. The second period is calculated by adding the remaining years of Solomon to the sum of the reigns of kings of Judah recorded in 1 and 2 Kings, making 430 years to 587 BC, to which are added the 50 years down to 537 BC (Ezr. 3: 8).

²⁵ *From Joseph to Joshua*, p. 101.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁷ *The Biblical Account of the Conquest of Palestine* (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1953), p. 48.

²⁸ Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-116, 164.

²⁹ 'The Literary and Historical Problem of Joshua 10 and Judges 1', *JNES* 5 (1946), pp. 109f. Cf. his *Biblical Archaeology*² (Duckworth, London, 1962), pp. 81-85.

³⁰ *Art. cit.*, p. 113.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 106f.

³² *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, p. 69 n.47.

³³ *The Biblical Account of the Conquest of Palestine* (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1953).

³⁴ 'Traditions Concerning Early Israelite History in Canaan', *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 8 (1961), pp. 303-334.

³⁵ *History of Israel*, pp. 72, 137.

³⁶ *Early Israel in Recent History Writing* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 19; SCM, London, 1956), pp. 116ff.

³⁷ In the subsequent discussion Mr A. R. Millard drew attention to the equation Micaiah = Micah (especially Jdg. 17: 1 *mykhw* = 17:5 - 18:31, *passim*, *mrykh*), which suggests the possibility that Judah is a hypocoristicon for *yhwdyh(w)*. Cf. perhaps Uzzah (= Uziah?), Shebna(h) (= Shebaniah?), as in M. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, *BWANT* III. 10 (Stuttgart, 1928), p. 160; cf. p. 253 (nos. 1039, 1045); p. 258 (nos. 1302, 1303).

³⁸ *History of Israel*, pp. 67, 56 n.2.

³⁹ *JPOS* 1 (1920), p. 68.

⁴⁰ *History of Israel*, p. 67.

⁴¹ W. F. Albright, 'Northwest Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves from the Eighteenth Century BC', *JAOS* 74 (1954), pp. 222-233; especially p. 227.

⁴² *Israel I-II* (OUP, 1926), p. 523; cf. pp. 286-291. On the massacre by two men, Pedersen points out that the victims were 'laying half dead with wound fever' (*ibid.*, p. 523).

⁴³ *Genesis*, p. 291.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 419.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴⁹ *Genesis 12-50* (SCM, London, 1962), p. 126.

⁵⁰ G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch* (ET, Oliver and Boyd, 1966), p. 58. Cf. A. Alt, *Der Gott der Väter* (1929), *ut sup.*

⁵¹ M. Noth, *Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels*, p. 56.

⁵² 'Altes Testament — "Amphiktyonie" und "Bund"', *ThLZ* 91 (1966), pp. 802ff.

⁵³ *Das System . . .*, p. 54.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 52f.

⁵⁶ Fohrer, *art. cit.*, p. 812.

⁵⁷ 'Philistine and Hebrew Amphictyonies', *JNES* 24 (1965), pp. 100-104.

⁵⁸ *Art. cit.*, p. 807.

⁵⁹ 'The Tribal System of Israel and Related Groups in the Period of the Judges', *Essays in Honour of A. A. Neumann* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1962), p. 379.

⁶⁰ *Art. cit.*, pp. 812ff. Cf. A. Malamat, *art. cit.*, *JAOS* 88 (1968), p. 164: 'The external evidence now lends support to the assumption that the genealogical traditions contained in Genesis reflect beliefs actually current among these peoples . . . and not the products of fancy or the pride of Israelite scribes.' Neither Fohrer nor Malamat, however, is arguing that Israel's self-understanding in these terms was biologically accurate.

⁶¹ *JBL* 79 (1960), pp. 157-163.

⁶² In the discussion following the lecture, Mr K. A. Kitchen pointed out the relevance, in this connection, of Merenptah's 'Israel' stela, where Israel alone, in its immediate context, bears the determinative for 'people' (cf. *ANET*, p. 378 n.18).

⁶³ E.g., recently, W. Beyerlin, *Herkunft und Geschichte der ältesten Sinaitraditionen* (Tübingen, 1961; ET *Origins and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1965); A. S. Kapelrud, 'Some Recent points of View on the Time and Origin of the Decalogue', *ST* 18 (1964), pp. 88f.

⁶⁴ *Mose und seine Zeit* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1913), pp. 121ff.

⁶⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁶⁶ *Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuchs*, BWANT IV. 26 (1938); ET *The Problem of the Hexateuch* (Oliver and Boyd, 1966), pp. 1ff.

⁶⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁶⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 55. Earlier (pp. 9-12) he has mentioned four other passages: Ex. 15 and Pss. 78, 135

and 136; but for reasons of space we will discuss only those of his primary choice, as above.

⁶⁹ Cf. R. E. Clements, *God's Chosen People* (SCM, London, 1968), pp. 55f.; J. A. Thompson, 'The Cultic Credo and the Sinai Tradition', *Reformed Theological Review* 27 (1968), pp. 53-64.
