

Word versus Earth

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

Many biblical scholars minimize the uniqueness of ancient Israel's experience. Yet judging from the materials that have come down to us, that experience was unique in several respects. The cults of many gods may have competed with that of Yahweh, but there seems to have been, early and uniquely, a group that insisted on following one God only, as reflected in Judges 5, the Song of Deborah. Unique too was the concept of a covenant between God and people, rather than merely God and king. These distinctive features must have come from somewhere — from a certain situation or experience. Archaeology cannot tell us much in this regard. Archaeology deals in comparisons — it has difficulty with the unique.

Archaeological surveys do indicate, however, that there was a massive wave of new settlement in the land in the 13th and 12th centuries BC, as part of a general upheaval throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Most of the settlers had been nomads, herders of small livestock, now taking up agriculture. Some of their new farmsteads developed into the towns that we associate with biblical Israel.

Agriculture is usually the precondition for national unity. Farmers stay put, so it is easy for a strong, adventurous type to find them again and again, extorting protection money (the forerunner of taxes). This person then uses the surplus wealth to maintain a standing army, with which he enforces unity from above. Nation-making is thus a kind of organized crime. But it all depends on agriculture. In this mundane sense one can say that the soil is a precondition for the unity of a people.

With Israel this was not the case. Indeed the hope for the soil was there, the promise of the land was basic. But according to the biblical accounts, the Israelites did not actually start out as a people by living on the land and farming it. They did not have the soil to unite them. Rather, they first had to unite in order to take and keep the soil. Such unity is a difficult and fragile matter, as we hear in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). Where then could the tribes get their larger unity, if not from the soil? In other words, how could they become an "Israel"? Once we pose the question this way, we can already see the answer: by focusing on one God, they could become one people.

The problem of national unity has always been a difficult one in this variegated land; it demanded, at that time, the perception of one only God acting in history. The tribes received the tradition of God's revelation to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and they heard in the human voices of their later leaders (Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, Samuel and others) always the "voice print" of that single and singular God. They felt the same divine person in the charisma of one leader after another. There is an intimate connection, therefore, between the nomadic origins of this people, longing for land -- needing unity, but not having the soil to unite them -- and their receptiveness to the revelation of God as one and only.

The Israelite relation to earth, in the sense of soil, is therefore ambivalent. The land is one of the two main things God promises, and the longing for it is determinative. On the other hand, one never owns it:

Leviticus 25:23

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and live as foreigners with me."

Nor may one get one's roots too deeply into it. Hence the practice of living in booths after the autumn harvest, at the Feast of Tabernacles:

Leviticus 23:42-43

"You shall dwell in booths seven days. All who are native-born in Israel shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God."

In order to keep one's independence from the earth, one was to let it lie fallow every seventh year:

Leviticus 25:1-4

"Yahweh said to Moses in Mount Sinai, 'Speak to the children of Israel, and tell them, "When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a Sabbath to Yahweh. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to Yahweh. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.'"

The principle yields two corollaries:

1. At the early stage (from the desert wandering through the Song of Deborah) it is literally the case that if you have faith, you will win. For if you have faith in the one God and obey His commandments, then you will be one people, and in unity is strength. The earliest form of the covenant relationship was not agricultural. There was nothing about the rain.

2. As long as they lacked roots in the earth, the Israelites had their roots in God and in one another. Here is another corollary of this situation: If you don't have the earth to unite you, your relations with one another had better be right. We who have grown up in a monotheistic tradition take it for granted that divinity and morality are linked, but in fact this was something new with ancient Israel. Pagans too had morality, and often they would call on their gods to enforce a code of behavior, but unless one counts the brief introduction to the Code of Hammurabi, we do not find the pagan gods legislating morality as Israel's God does. These are the two tables of Jewish law: love of God and love of neighbor (as Jesus will remind the young lawyer before telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which he sets, appropriately, on a desert road).

The Israelites did sink their roots into the soil, and then a strong man was able to tax them and maintain a standing army,

enforcing unity from above. This spelled the death of community (a unity that originates from being with one another). They became like the nations: they no longer felt directly dependent on one God in order to be one people. And so they started worshipping the gods of the land.

The role of the charismatic covenant mediator split between the king, who typically had power without charisma, and the prophet, who had charisma without power.

The prophets attempted to call Israel away from its absorption in the earth and back to its original, intense relation, as in the time of the desert wandering. ({}tips)"Go, and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says Yahweh, "I remember for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your weddings; how you went after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness to Yahweh, the first fruits of his increase. All who devour him shall be held guilty. Evil shall come on them," says Yahweh."|Jeremiah 2:2-3{/tips} and especially Hosea 2)

Despite the pull of the earth, the force of the origin remained. It is no accident that this people, landless and dispersed among the nations, was able to maintain its identity for over a thousand years on the basis of words: the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud.