

Chapter 11
In the Days When Judges Ruled

In many histories of Israel, this era of "the conquest and the judges" has been considered merely an entertaining interlude between the high times of Moses and David. We are now beginning to understand that this is an inadequate way to view this period. It was, rather, an unusually creative time for Israel, a time when these ancient people tried to take seriously the mandate given to them when they accepted for themselves the name of Israel. The name means "Let God Rule," and in these two centuries between Moses and David we can trace the methods by which the tribes organized their lives to give substance to their basic faith: that they were a people who intended not to rule themselves but to be instead Israel, the people who let God alone rule.

The key to understanding the era is to be found in the assembly of tribes called by Joshua at the ancient city of Shechem. When they gathered at his request, he recited to them what God had done for them: God's call to the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, the conquest of the Promised Land, and the settlement of the tribes in this new land. Then he challenged them to put away their allegiance to other gods and accept Yahweh, the God of Israel, as ruler over them. The people promised to do so, and he set up a sacred stone to remind them of their promise.

Why was this assembly held? At first glance, it would appear to be simply a re-enactment in the new land of the covenant made under Moses near Mount Sinai; most likely this is the way it was understood by later generations of Israelites. Yet to comprehend the intriguing aspects of the assembly, a series of questions has to be raised. Who was present at the assembly? Why was Shechem chosen as the place for meeting? What was the point of "putting away the gods that you served beyond the River," especially if the question was put to people whose faith had been purified by the disciplines of the wilderness and the conquest of the land? This assembly at Shechem tells more about Israelite life than appears on the surface.

When we inquire who came to the assembly, the obvious answer is that the twelve tribes of Israel were present, or at least delegated representatives of each, and there seems nothing unusual about this. Had these tribes not been united with each other in their conquest of Canaan? Had they not fought their way side by side into the Promised land? Had they not witnessed together the events of the exodus, the giving of the covenant, the leadership

of the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night? Were they not, as descendants of the night? Were they not, as descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, related to one another by blood, with a common ancestor in Abraham, and had they not gone together into Egypt? The answer to each of these questions is no.

The very names of the tribes are the most certain evidence for our negative answer. While some of the tribes - Judah, Simeon, Dan - bear the names of persons and hence might have traced their lineage to a patriarch like Jacob, others derived their names from other sources. Ephraim, for one, took its name from the mountainous area in which it settled; the area had already been called Ephraim before the clans of Israel had settled there. Issachar was a nickname meaning "laborer" and referred to the servitude in which this tribe had been held before it became part of Israel. Furthermore, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh occupied the same land that had been earlier assigned to the tribes of Simeon and Levi; these two earlier tribes had largely disappeared before Ephraim and Manasseh came into Canaan. The tribal names alone provide strong evidence that the entrance of the tribes into Canaan did not take place in a concerted movement. Some tribes were settled before others came; and some may never have departed in the earlier descent into Egypt under Jacob but may have remained in Canaan while their comrades were first welcomed and then enslaved in that distant land.

Nor had all the tribes been eye-witnesses of the great events of Sinai and the exodus. Some had participated in these acts of deliverance, and the memory of them was to shape their life for generations to come. But others had only the word of their neighbors that the events had occurred, and they needed to be convinced that God had done what the returning tribesmen said he had. Joshua called them together at Shechem to settle that matter.

In his own mind Joshua had excellent reasons for choosing Shechem as the place of meeting. It was an ancient and important city in Canaan, dating back to at least 2,000 B.C., and whose location in a narrow pass between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal made control of Shechem imperative for anyone who wanted to settle peacefully in northern Canaan. Shechem was also a religious center; here God was said to have appeared near a sacred oak tree to Abraham when the patriarch had first entered Canaan. Shechem was also a neutral city as far as the gathering tribes were concerned. Israel had not conquered the city when they entered Canaan, but it was occupied by people friendly to them. For these military, political and religious reasons Shechem was an excellent site for the assembly at which Joshua intended to bind the tribes to new loyalty to God and each other.

When the tribes had gathered, Joshua put a clear challenge before them:

"Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

This challenge was of a double nature. He called upon the tribes who had not gone to Egypt to put away the gods they had worshipped beyond the River; in other words, Joshua suspected that they were still worshipping the gods of their Mesopotamian homeland, and he ordered them to put these gods aside and worship Yahweh. He also called upon those who had come into Egypt and were living east of the Jordan River, that is, in Amorite country, to put away the Amorite gods they found there and worship the God of Israel. This was the key moment in Israel's formation. Tribes of diverse background and differing experiences were at this moment to unite with a common heritage and in a common purpose to worship and to serve the Lord their God.

Twelve tribes responded to this call and banded themselves together in this pact. It was a convenient number. Federations of this size were large enough to provide for common defense, and we have evidence from Ancient Greece and Italy, as well as from nearby groupings of Edomite, Ishmaelite, Hittite, and Aramaic tribes, that confederations composed of twelve tribes were a common form of regional organization. Twelve was also a sacred number. With confederations of this size, each tribe could be assigned care for one month of the year of the shrine sacred to the whole group; the burden on any one tribe would not be unbearable, and all would have access at all times to the shrine. Joshua had done his work well. At Shechem the tribes pledged loyalty to God and to each other, and they accepted each other's sacred histories as their own. Here, near a shrine sacred to the memories of some, the embryos of Israel which to this moment had been struggling for life was born.

II

We can trace some of the movement that brought the tribes into Canaan, the process that historically has been called the conquest of Canaan.

Not all the tribes that became Israel were involved in this conquest. Reuben and Simeon were not; early residents in Canaan, these tribes had begun to disappear before the conquering tribes moved in. Judah was most likely not involved in it either. A vigorous tribe even before the conquest began and later to be the center of the kingdom of David and Solomon, Judah remained in Canaan and welcomed back those who had been enslaved in Egypt.

The tribes that did enter Canaan from Egypt were those of Benjamin and the house of Joseph, that is, the tribes later known as Manasseh and Ephraim. Joshua himself was of the house of Joseph. Benjamin, the smallest of the tribes, was also among the most aggressive. These were the "Rachel tribes" of Israel, the ones who traced their lineage to the marriage of Jacob with his favorite wife Rachel, and it was the forcible entrance of these kindred peoples into the land that gave the era the title of "the time of conquest."

The number of persons in this advance probably totalled between six and ten thousand. These people left Kadesh-Barnea in the Negev desert, where they had remained for a generation after leaving Egypt, and travelled east to a point just south of the Dead Sea. They passed the tribal areas of Edom and Moab, circled Moab, and reached Canaan just opposite Jericho, where they crossed the Jordan River. They moved toward Jerusalem and won a battle at Gibeah. Following that victory they burst out of the mountains and attacked the settlements of the Plain of Jezreel. They had won their way into Canaan.

There is archaeological evidence yet visible of the damage these tribes did during their entrance to Canaan. Especially at Lachish and Gibeah, the trained eye can see the punishment they inflicted on these cities. In other cities, however, the evidence of the archaeologist's trowel points out that it was not only Israelite tribes that were active in the warfare of the day; rather the whole of Canaan was in a time of turmoil during which one invading force after another trod roughshod over the land. Bethel, Hebron and Shiloh among others were destroyed and reoccupied time and again during the period from 1350 to 1100. Two cities described as destroyed in the conquest – Jericho and Ai—were already in ruins at the time of the advance of the tribes.

An archaeological discovery called the Amarna letters gives insight into this. Dated just prior to the entrance of Benjamin and Joseph, these letters indicated that local bands of guerrillas were causing widespread disturbance in cities throughout the land. Canaan had always been a battleground, and this was especially true during the age of Israelite conquest.

But the battles did subside, and the invading Israelites did gain a foothold in the land. So the elders were summoned to meet at Shechem, and the covenant was made between Yahweh and the assenting tribes. This new confederacy calling itself Israel began to see what they must do to structure their public life to reflect that principle.

III

One of the innovations they introduced was to shift the ark of the covenant from shrine to shrine within Israel; one time it was stationed at Bethel,

another at Hebron, another at Shechem. They did this as an expression of the nature of the Lord God. They had come to the firm conviction that their God was not a "place god" like the gods of the Canaanites around them, each with a permanent residence and permanent priesthood. They discovered instead that the Lord God had the freedom to go where God wanted to go and do what God wanted to do. This God had called them through Abraham, delivered them at the Sea of Reeds, made covenant with them at Sinai, and under Joshua had given them the land; and it was in "joining the dots" of these actions, so to speak, that Israel began to understand the nature of the God with whom they were in league. This was the God of all times and places, of all peoples and nations. and could not be confined to a single shrine. Israel's shifting of the ark of the covenant from shrine to shrine proved a perfect symbol of their understanding of their God.

The economic institutions of Israel also were fashioned to show that God only ruled, and in developing their economic system they deliberately avoided the situations that had caused oppression and exploitation to exist in Canaanite cities.

The Canaanites had developed a full-fledged feudal system of economy. Kings ruled and received great wealth; they were supported and upheld in this by priestly and commercial classes; the common people were impoverished by taxation and enslaved by being drafted into armies or forced against their will into work gangs. Israel developed their economy in such a way that none of these conditions occurred. The basic Israelite economic institution was a small family grouping of father and mother, married sons and their families, with a few other relatives intermixed. These small groups - raising grains and fruits, perhaps sheep, goats, and a few cattle - were economically nearly self-sufficient; each worked the land, bred the herds, and engaged in the crafts that supported their lifestyle. But each family was engaged with a larger protective unit, roughly equivalent to a clan, and these clans were to assist one another in times of economic trouble. If a family had lost its land, the clan helped to recover it; if someone was sold into debt slavery, the clan helped to gather the money to purchase his freedom; if drought wiped out the crops, the clan shared with those who suffered the misfortune the food it had; if someone needed a loan, it was supplied to them without interest by their clan. And if the clan was not able to perform this function, the the tribe, the larger unit, was expected to step in to do it. In this way Israel produced what it needed, consumed almost all it produced, bartered with the rest, and lived in a network of mutual assistance.

Compared with the wealth and poverty of a Canaanite city -state, the lifestyle of the Israelite family, clan, and tribe was simple; but it was kept deliberately so, in order that not

the wealth of land and herd, not the commercial classes who controlled the wealth, not the king himself could dominate Israel's life but rather that they might be a people whom God rules, even in their economic dealings with one another.

They also organized their legal systems to reflect that understanding. In Israel, each tribe and clan was ruled but its own inherited code of laws and each one was called upon to respect the rights of the elders of the respective tribes to be the final interpreters of their own traditions. The legal principle fit perfectly the covenant-treaty set up by Moses. When God made God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, God had set the broad parameters beyond which each tribe could not go, but within those limits each tribe had freedom to organize its own internal affairs. This lack of intent to make every tribe conform to some central standard of conduct was another of the means by which Israel was true to its name: in the matter of law, they organized their confederacy to let God rule.

This was also the case in the issue of leadership. They adapted for their own purposes the office of "judge." Perhaps flourishing in many places in the Mideast, the office had a direct line back to the ancient nation of Ebia. From about 3000 B.C. to around 1600, this city-state had commanded an area where the trade routes coming north from Egypt turned eastward toward Mesopotamia. For many centuries knowledge of this kingdom had been lost to history; it had remained as only an unexplored and abandoned tell, a small mountain of debris fifty feet high and thirty-six hundred feet in circumference covered by the dust of centuries, until in 1974 two Italian archaeologists dug into its main library. They uncovered a civilization that at its zenith was nearly as important in influence as Egypt and Sumeria themselves. Among their discoveries they found that Ebia had a class of leaders whom they placed over conquered cities and to whom they gave a name similar to the Hebrew "judge."

As the office evolved in Israel, it provided a convenient answer to the Israelite dilemma about leadership. Starting from the basic premise that God alone was their ruler, the Israelites found the principle easy to abide by in times of peace, but in times of crisis they were hard put to fashion a form of governance compatible with their conviction. The office of judge did this for them; charismatic, non-hereditary, temporary, open to men and women, free-born Israelites and slaves, it permitted particular persons to come forward to act in God's stead during the emergency as Israel's defender and deliverer; but when the crisis had ended, Yahweh's spirit was withdrawn from the erstwhile leader, and he returned to his former status in Israel. This office of judge proved to be Israel's answer to its leadership problem: in this way the people could be defended without compromising their basic belief that they were to let God rule.

Among the earliest of the judges was a woman, Deborah, and to her fell the necessity to free Israel from the local Canaanite enemies. Israel was entrenched in the hill country but the resident tribes of Canaan were astride the trade routes on the plain. These indigenous populations were squeezing Israel economically, and Deborah summoned the tribes

to battle to relieve this pressure. The armies met at Megiddo. Back and forth the battle raged, with Israel on the brink of being overpowered, until a driving rainstorm caused the river Kishon to overflow onto the plain of Jezreel: Canaanite charioteers mired down in the mud and their armies were destroyed. This marked the end of the united Canaanite effort against Israel. But Israelites did not claim that the victory was the result of their arms. Yahweh, they said, had come from Sinai, caused the storm, and won the battle. Such a victory confirmed the Israelites in their belief that God was their deliverer and that their form of governance was valid indeed.

Gideon, a later judge, was called out to face the growing power of the Midianite federation. Forces of Midian from the desert had entered Canaan to dislodge the Israelites who with the victory at Megiddo now were the ascendant power in Canaan. Midian brought a new challenge: war camels, the first use of such animals in recorded history. Gideon summoned the tribes and then he dismissed most of them. By a ruse using trumpets, torches and empty pitchers – plus an inordinate amount of courage – he and his men put the Midianites to flight and forced them back into the deserts from which they had come.

A third judge, Samson, had a decidedly unorthodox approach to his office; instead of calling the tribes to arms, he fought the enemy single-handedly, using his overpowering physical strength in an attempt to hold back a third challenge to Israel, the invasion of Philistines. Samson was a valiant man, and many of his enemies fell at his hands; but he was also vain, and his penchant for women and glory-seeking, led to his early and tragic death.

The Philistine crisis pointed up a new problem confronting Israel: would its carefully constructed religious, political, and military structures be able to cope with a well-organized and cohesive force such as Philistia represented? These sea-peoples from the Aegean region brought with them new populations seeking fields and cities, new technologies to support their fighting men, and new resolve to make the lands of Canaan their own. Could the covenant community, Israel, reorganize its life in such a way that it could meet the threat of Philistia and still remain true to their covenant with God?

Israel did try. Its response to the challenge was to consider replacing their judges with a king. After the battle at Shiloh in which Philistine forces destroyed an Israelite army and captured the ark of the covenant, it was finally clear to the Israelites that their old structure of organization was not adequate to meet the new situation and Israel began to consider the idea of kingship as an alternative. The esteemed Samuel – last of the judges, considered by some a prophet, Israel's most universally regarded spiritual leader since Joshua and perhaps since Moses – led the way. He anointed Saul as king. When Saul proved unsatisfactory, Samuel made another choice: David. A chapter closed for Israel: its attempt to be faithful to Yahweh by developing a political organization based on parity for each tribe and on temporary and charismatic leadership was over. Now it was to embark on a new course, to see if, through the political agency of kingship, Israel could still remain faithful to her Lord of the Covenant.

There is evidence that Israel took this step reluctantly. Two accounts of the establishment of kingship exist side-by-side in First Samuel. One indicates that Israel accepted her new king enthusiastically, the other that even Samuel was not anxious for a king and was able to get Israel to accept Saul, and kingship, only because he finally turned the weight of his personal authority behind the move. Both the hopes and fears of Israel about kingship were justifiable. Israel was eventually to establish its rule over the land of Canaan, but the question remained moot as to whether the king would be accountable to the covenant established by God or whether he would try to find ways to circumvent it. It was the prophets of Israel who in the name of Yahweh set themselves to calling the successors of David to that accountability.