

THE GAP

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Introduction

The reputation of the Hebrews has been so whittled away by modern scholarship that they are often represented nowadays as a band of simple shepherd folk living on the fringes and at the tail-end of the great Bronze Age civilization. But could such an insignificant people have produced the Bible? which is, after all, not just one of the seven wonders of the literary world, but the first of them. Comparable anthologies of Greek, Latin, German, French or English literature, would all be the products of peak periods of civilization, times of wealth and power.

1. The Hebrew Chroniclers and their chronology

If you extracted the historical sections of the Bible, and compiled them into a Hebrew Chronicle, it would comprise about eight short books; six of which ($\frac{3}{4}$) would give detailed descriptions of two major events only: the Exodus-to-Conquest (3 books), and the Empire, from Saul to Solomon, (3 books). In the time-setting or chronology prescribed by the ancient chroniclers, it is precisely these two major events that have been drastically pared down. In the otherwise well-documented New Kingdom, the Egyptians seem not to have noticed the plagues; the wilderness divulges nothing for this era, and worst of all there is no trace of a conquest by newcomers. The conquest is represented as an infiltration by a people who left no trace. Similarly the Empire has to be drastically reduced, falling at a time of small signs of recovery from a period when civilization had reached its lowest point. There is no sign of trade (K. Kenyon cannot find evidence of one single imported object) and even the nearby copper mines at Arabah were not being worked just then.

Any new investigation must first assess the validity of a chronology devised by chroniclers more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ millenia ago. Similar ancient chronologies are notoriously unreliable. They were based on a crude system of adding together the reigns of kings, so for example in Egypt, when kings had in fact reigned simultaneously in Upper and Lower Egypt, their reigns nevertheless got added on to each other, leading to a hopelessly extended chronology. But on the other hand, what if there were no king, no court and no court-chronicler for a while?

If you abandon the chronology and look instead for traces of the major events described, what do you find?

2. The rise and fall of the Hebrew-speaking people.

This very different approach anchors the Exodus-to-Conquest and the Empire nearly a thousand years earlier than is currently taught, and yields surprising fruit in the light the Bible can throw on the Bronze Age and vice-versa. Ipuwer's description of the catastrophic collapse of the Pyramid Age in Egypt matches the Hebrew account of the Plagues, often line for line. Professor Anati's remarkable finds at Har Karkom, and Professor Cohen's investigations have brought to light the very real traces left by the Hebrew sojourn in the wilderness. The massive walls of Jericho fallen outwards in an earthquake (although they have been misinterpreted twice in the past, by Garstang then Kenyon) can once more be identified positively with the walls that fell before Joshua's attack

in the Hebrew account. This conquest of the Early Bronze Age civilization, with their great walled cities on both sides of the Jordan, matches point by point the detailed Hebrew account of the conquest. From then on, the Hebrew-speaking people are settled in the Levant, devising the proto-Hebrew alphabet, (Sinaitic script), with an already profoundly old cultural and literary background, as is confirmed by the library found recently at Ebla.

For the next few hundred years there appears to have been a loose coalition of the large Semite states, ruled by judges ('ensi'). In the last part of the Middle Bronze Age there was a consolidation and centralisation of power which produced the first Empire on earth, the Empire of the Hyksos. The extent of this empire has been much disputed: at first it was thought to be very farflung indeed, because the name of one of its Emperors (Khyan) was found very far afield - from Crete to East of the Tigris. More recently it has been much reduced: but some of the evidence has yet to be assessed, including that of the Bible. What immediately links this Empire with the Empire of Solomon are the building works: massive fortress cities across the Levant (with their distinctive plastered slopes to foil battering rams or siege weapons) on all the key sites where David, Solomon, and Jeroboam built garrison towns and fortress cities in their prodigious building programme that involved mass slave-labour. This Hyksos Empire, like the Hebrew Empire, lasted little more than a century: and K. Kenyon has suggested an ethnic identification of the Hyksos with the Habiru (Hebrews) of the Levant. The Egyptian historian Manetho records that when the Hyksos were expelled from Avaris they went up and founded Jerusalem, thereby equating them with the Jews. Recent excavations have found Minoan wall-paintings at Avaris, which is consistent with David having a bodyguard of Cretans, and the discovery that Linear A, (the Minoan script newly deciphered) is related to the Semitic dialects of the Southern Arab peninsula, may in due course, say something about the extent of this Empire. Regardless of the exact extent, ~~of the Hyksos Empire~~ this was the zenith of West Semite power and prosperity. The reason why K. Kenyon could not discover any signs of particular wealth is not hard to trace: the annals of Amenophis II and Thutmose the III record in detail the vast quantities of yellow gold and white gold plundered in loot from the crumbling Hyksos Empire. It formed the material foundations of the dazzling splendour of the New Kingdom of Egypt. Some of the cultural splendour of the New Kingdom would also have been appropriated from David's psalms and Solomon's proverbs in the previous era - if this were indeed the Hebrew Empire.

Using these two key events as anchors, we find the Hebrew account in the Bible matches the story of the West Semites who spoke Hebrew, and played a central part in the first civilization on earth.

3. The Gap.

If a large chunk of biblical history is put back 1,000 years, then at some point there must be a gap in the narrative, a few centuries that are missing, centuries that have not been accounted for by the chroniclers. This is not an arbitrary gap, inserted without good cause. Towards the end of that glorious era, the Bronze Age, the Hebrew-speaking people were defeated and routed and the spoils of their Empire were carved up, not just by Egypt, but by the Hittites and the Mitanni as well. Many of their princes were taken as part of the spoil. Then they were crushed and decimated by the Sea Peoples. The reigning Pharaoh says of them: 'It is as if they had never been.' Which fits with the biblical description of a people once numerous as the stars of heaven, now become rare as fine gold.

What I am proposing is that an editor's note needs to be inserted

in the Bible - just a couple of lines in square brackets: 'Jehosaphat and Zimri died, and several hundred years passed before Omri came to the throne and built his new capital on the hill of Samaria.'

Better still, (to make matters even clearer,) divide the Bible itself into two volumes. Volume One would end with the reigns of Jehosaphat and Zimri, and would be about the heyday of the West Semites in the Bronze Age, till they were crushed and nearly annihilated. Volume Two (the Middle Testament?) would open on a very different scene a few hundred years later: a mere remnant of the half-tribe of Ephraim huddled in Samaria, and threatened on all sides by powerful neighbours, Assyrians, Medes and Persians. And another remnant huddled in Jerusalem. But at least there was a king and court-chroniclers once more - busy compiling the history of their people, the Hebrew-speaking people. But how much information did they have at their disposal? They knew their people had been crushed and decimated, but had any records been kept of how long the ^{period of} sore distress had lasted? They knew of Omri's capital at Samaria, which was still standing:

but what about before that? Did they just push together what they knew, making the reign of Omri contemporary with that of Jehosaphat, thereby introducing a hopelessly compressed chronology? Is that how Volume One, The Old Testament, got merged with Volume Two, The Middle Testament? And is it their small mistake of ignoring a gap (nothing disappears like a gap after all) that has caused such confusion in recent decades?

Conclusion

This adjustment of the chronology - putting the main part of Biblical history back 1,000 years - will not suit everybody. People of religious conviction may be disturbed by the fact that the early Hebrews did not practise the religion ascribed to them by later editors of the Bible, working after there had been extensive religious reforms. Equally the sceptics will not be happy because they can no longer dismiss the Bible as an irrelevant footnote at the tail-end of the story of religion and civilization: they can no longer minimize and marginalize the contribution of the Hebrews. The wider significance of Biblical history for the Semites as a whole (therefore including the Arabs) may cause uneasiness among Jews who see it as their special preserve. And some academics may be alarmed that they will be accused of having failed to see the wood for the trees: or in some cases, having failed to see the tree for the twigs and leaves.

Others, like myself, may find it satisfying that the Bible is the product of a people as old as civilization, on which they were a formative influence.

But such reactions and emotions - whether for or against - cannot change the facts, the wealth of evidence that has already been unearthed and continues to be unearthed, with such painstaking diligence. Let us continue to investigate, with the same diligent attention to detail - but without letting it obscure the big picture, the overall view.

Bibliography

For a full bibliography (and more detailed study of this proposal,) see "The Age of Myth", Tom Chetwynd. 1991. (Harper Collins, London and San Francisco.)