THE RĪB-* OR CONTROVERSY-PATTERN IN HEBREW MENTALITY

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1. THE FREQUENCY OF DISPUTES IN ISRAELITE LIFE

The frequency of quarrelling in the life of the ancient Hebrews is reflected on many pages of the Old Testament. Materials for comparison as between the Hebrews and other ancient peoples in this respect will be difficult to obtain. The occurrence of so many cases of strife in the Old Testament is perhaps more proof of the honesty of the narrators than of the quarrelsomeness of their people. Cain and Lamech are certainly not represented as ideal Hebrews or model people in Gen. iv. The strife between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot is attributed to the circumstances in which these family chiefs had to live, to lack of “Lebensraum” (Gen. xiii). Quarrels about wells are bound to arise in arid regions. The names of three wells are connected with such controversies in Genesis: Beer-Sheba (Gen. xxvi 26-32, ending in a “covenant”), Esek “Contention” and Sitnah “Enmity” (Gen. xxvi 18-20, 21), and a fourth with a happy absence of animosity, Rehoboth “Room” (Gen. xxvi 22). An illustrative example of a rib is offered in the narrative of Laban’s overtaking of Jacob on his flight with Laban’s daughters (Gen. xxxi 25-55), with its diversity of accusations, threatenings, pleadings of innocence and ignorance, contra-accusations, appeal to ancient herdsman rights, and finally to God. In the rib between Jacob and Laban (verse 36) God bōkiṭāh ‘decided’ (verse 42, not “rebuked ‘you’”), according to Jacob, beforehand by his warning of Laban in a dream (verses 24, 29); the outcome of the contention is also here a “covenant”, with an everlasting witness (a maṣṣēbâ according to one tradition, a heap of stones according to the other, verses 44 ff.).

*) In transcribing Hebrew words no distinction has been made between consonants with and without dāḡēš.
The quarrelling (niṣṣā') of the two Hebrews in Egypt (Ex. ii 13 f.) was like the rib supposed in the Book of the Covenant (Ex. xxi 18 f.), not with words only, but with fist or stick or stone 1).

In the late narrative on the altar built by the Transjordan tribes in Jordan's borderland (Jos. xxii), we find a dispute between two halves of the Israelite ēdā', or national-cultic community, on an eventual threat to their national and cultic unity; although not called a rib, integral elements of it are represented in the accusations of a ma'al or "encroachment upon the rights" of the one God and his cult and the unity of his people (verses 16 ff.), the assurance to the contrary in the form of an oath of purgation (verses 21 ff.), and the settling of the dispute by providing a guarantee and witness (by giving a name to the altar, which unfortunately has fallen out, verse 34).

A genuine tribal dispute threatened to arise between Gideon, head of the Abiezer-clan of the tribe of Manasseh, and the tribe of Ephraim, but their "violent upbraiding" was dexterously and quickly appeased by the "Judge" (Jud. viii 1-3). A similar case arose between the Ephraimites and Jephthah the Gileadite, this time with much more serious consequences (Jud. xii 1-6); it is interesting here, in the reproach of Jephthah against the Ephraimites, that he calls himself and his "people" ('am) a 'iš rib "a person with a case, a feud" against the Ammonites, in which he had not been "helped" (his right had not been vindicated, bôša') by the Ephraimites.

The haughty and ungrateful treatment experienced by David and his "young men" from the wealthy farmer Nabal constituted a case; Nabal's sudden death was considered by David as a divine vindication of his right: bārûk yahwē 'iser rāḇ 'et-rib herpātî miyyadānāḇāl lit. "Blessed be the Lord who has given judgement in the law-suit of the disgrace suffered by me from the side of Nabal" (I Sam. xxi 39). The continuous persecutions by king Saul form another instance of litigation in which David feels himself involved and in which he hopes for divine judgement: wōḥāyā yahwē l-dâyān w-rāḇbāt bēît ēḇēnēkā w-jērē wūjārē 'et-ribi w-yišpētēni miyyādēkā (I Sam. xxiv 15). These and similar experiences, like the rebellion of his son Absalom (2 Sam. xv ff.) and the rivalry between the men of Judah and of Israel (2 Sam. xix 41 ff.,

1) Deut. xxxiii 7 also speaks of a rib with the hands; cf. the same verb with bēî instrumenti, Am. vii 4 (uncertain text); Jes. xxvii 8; and niṣpat b'r, Ezekh. xxxviii 22, indicating the means of punishment.