THE MEDITERRANEAN FACTOR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

BY

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The geography of Palestine obliges us to consider the land a Mediterranean country. While the maps of course do justice to this fact, the OT histories as a rule do not. The tacit assumption is that New Testament Palestine was Mediterranean because it was part of the Roman Empire, whereas until the Conquest of Alexander the Great, Old Testament Palestine belonged to the Near East and was cut off from the Sea by Phoenicians and Philistines who controlled the coast. How unsatisfactory this approach is, becomes evident from the material findings in the Palestinian excavations particularly of the Minoan and Mycenaean periods. From architecture to ceramics, archeology shows us that ancient Israel and Hellas were at no time totally cut off from each other. It is true that the contacts were strongest at the beginning and end of OT times, and weakest during the centuries when Greece and Israel produced their most distinctive contributions. Perhaps the main factor accounting for the attenuation of contacts between the two spheres was the series of Asiatic World Empires (Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, Persian) which engulfed Palestine but (except for brief interludes in the reigns of Darius I and Xerxes I) left Greece unscathed to develop its own culture within the framework of the native city states. It was during the era of the Asiatic World Empires that Greece and Israel developed their distinctive classical cultures. Greece then produced her scientists and philosophers; Israel, her prophets. To retroject the classical images of Greece and Israel back into the second millennium is unjustified. The heroes of the Iliad and Judges are in many ways closer to each other than they are to their respective classical descendants ¹).

The world of the Hebrews is clearly delineated in Genesis 10 which

¹) E. g., Jephthah, like Agamemnon, sacrificed his daughter for the success of his expedition.
reckons with " (verses 2-5) "Greece" (in the sense of Ionia and the Greek islands).

That Israel and Greece were united in the Hellenistic Order after Alexander's Conquest is well known. "Jew" and "Greek" were then not mutually exclusive terms. Philo of Alexandria was culturally both Jewish and Greek.

Even during the centuries that witnessed the distinctive developments in both Greece and Israel, contact between the two peoples did not come to a halt. The late Franz Dornseiff demonstrated that contacts were constant ever since 1000 B.C. What remains to be added is that both Israel and Greece were rooted in the same West Semitic World of the second millennium B.C., mutatis mutandis.

Until the fifteenth century B.C. the thalassocrats who dominated the trade of the East Mediterranean were West Semites of a type that the Hellenes called Phoenician. Ancient Greek authors, including Homer and Herodotus, preserve traditions to the effect that the Minoan world was dominated by Phoenicians. King Minos, for example, was the son of the Phoenician princess Europa 1). Her brother Cadmos founded Thebes and introduced writing. Phoenicians settled Thasos near the north end of the Aegean Sea, and even settled the Black Sea shore of Asia Minor. The Phoenician Danaos conquered the Argolid and for centuries the Greeks gloried in calling themselves Danaoi. The Phoenician Kilix settled Cilicia; etc., etc. 2).

We are faced with the fact that Semitic toponyms and personal names appear in early Greece, whereas Greek toponyms and personal names do not appear in early Canaan 3). This suggests that the Greeks displaced Semites in much of what is now the Greek segment of the East Mediterranean. The tradition enshrined in Genesis 9:27 4) to

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1) I am at a loss to understand statements such as the following to the effect that Minos was Greek and that tradition strips him of human ancestry: "But the Minos of Homer, Thucydides and Herodotus is a Greek king who ruled in Crete. His lack of human ancestry implies that he had come from elsewhere to establish his dynasty" (N. G. L. Hammond, A History of Greece to 322 B.C., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1959, p. 69). Born of the Phoenician Europa, did not Minos have non-Greek but human ancestry at least on his mother's side?

2) The evidence for the Phoenicians in the world of the Hellenes down to the mid-second millennium has been assembled and interpreted by R. Weill, Phoenicia and Western Asia, Harrap, London, 1940.

3) This will be demonstrated in detail in the Brandeis University doctoral dissertation of M. Astour, entitled Hellen-Semitica that I hope will be published soon.

4) יפת אליהם לאלים וישכם מאהיליסם.