THE ISRAELITE TRIBES IN JUDGES

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Martin Noth’s theory of an Israeliite Amphictyony, Das System der Zwölf Stämme Israels (Stuttgart, 1930), has had a good innings in Old Testament study, but is heavily under fire today. It has never been without critics 1). Now, with the work of A. D. H. Mayes, Israel in the Period of the Judges (London, 1974), and C. H. J. de Geus, The Tribes of Israel: an investigation into some of the presuppositions of Martin Noth’s Amphictyony hypothesis (Assen/Amsterdam, 1976), its defeat may be said to be complete. This means that we have to look afresh at the Book of Judges, to see what the Israeliite tribes were really like before the monarchy was established.

It is obvious that the subject is too large for comprehensive treatment in a single article, and that it will be necessary to be selective. In what follows attention will be drawn to three important lists in Judges, which provide information about the tribes in the period. The first is the list of the Minor Judges (x 1-5, xii 7-15). It will be shown that such information as may be gleaned from the list is significant for an understanding of the nature of the tribes, but does not support a theory of inter-tribal organization. The second is the list in the composite first chapter of the book, which ostensibly shows the state of the tribes at the beginning of the period, but in fact gives a useful picture of the position at the very end of it. The third is the

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list in the Song of Deborah in chapter v. This reveals a fluid situation, in which the tribes are in process of development and are not yet permanently settled. Finally an attempt will be made to discover the basis of unity among the tribes in this period.

I. The Minor Judges

The Minor Judges make a good starting point, because they have been taken to be amphictyonic officers having a pan-Israelite status, and the information about them is certainly very ancient. But it must be said at once that this is a case where the theory has influenced the interpretation. In fact the theory of the Amphictyony has had an extraordinary effect on the interpretation of Judges as a whole. Though supposedly supported by the evidence of Judges 2), it has been taken too readily to be the key to its problems, as can be seen in the recent commentaries of John Gray, Joshua, Judges and Ruth (London and Edinburgh, 1967), and Robert Boling, Judges (Garden City, 1975). It has been long agreed that Judges is a collection of traditions of tribal exploits, worked over with a new introduction by the Deuteronomic historian, and that it is he who has imposed upon the book its pan-Israelite interpretation. Take away his framework, and the amphictyonic impression disappears. The tribes do not at all behave as if they were an Amphictyony conforming to the pattern of Noth’s System. But the theory presupposes pan-Israelite institutions, including a central sanctuary, periodic assemblies of representatives of all the tribes, mutual obligations in the wars of Yahweh, and the personal supervision of a chief of all the tribes known as the Judge. Consequently the critic who accepts this theory is tempted to read into the early sources precisely the sort of interpretation presupposed by the Deuteronomic historian, so that what he takes away with one hand he puts back with the other. And when facts are few and far between he is always liable to use his amphictyonic imagination to fill in the gaps.

An example may be given from Gray’s comment on one of the

2) Noth, System, Exkurs IV, argued that Jud. xix-xxi, in spite of much re-shaping, gives evidence for the actual working of the Amphictyony. In fact the pan-Israelite features of the story are better explained as due to rationalization of events which originally had only local significance. The process is comparable to the idealization of the tribal system in Jos. xxii. The weaknesses of Noth’s analysis of these chapters were already pointed out in the article of Eissfeldt mentioned above.