THE PATTERN OF THE ISRAELITE SETTLEMENT
IN CANAAN

by

MOSHE WEINFELD
Jerusalem

The stories of the migration of the Hebrew ancestors to the land of Canaan and the settlement of their descendants are without parallel in the great cultures of the ancient Near East: Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Hittites. In contrast, surprising parallels can be found in the accounts of the founding of settlements in the Greek Aegean world. Further, in Israel as well as in the Aegean world, we can distinguish two stages in the crystallization of traditions related to the beginning of settlement in a new land. The first contains legendary stories of the first ancestor-hero who, with his family, arrives at the new settlement, while the second recounts the history of his descendants, who settle under the direction of a founder (κτίστης). In both the Hebrew and Greek cultures, we find that a gap of several centuries separates the first and second stages.

The first stage of the settlement traditions, which corresponds to the Pentateuchal stories, has been analysed by me elsewhere.¹ I tried to demonstrate that such traditions began to crystallize after the destruction of Troy and the collapse of the kingdoms on the Eastern Mediterranean, when small groups of peoples, at the outset of their national existence, were seeking an ethnic-national identity. Traditions of the ancestor of the nation and the beginnings of the settlement of his descendants in the new land served as an answer to this question of national identity.

Evidence that such a tendency was in existence among peoples of the area can be found in Amos ix 7, where the origins of Israel who came out of Egypt are compared with those of the Arameans, who were originally from Kir, and the Philistines, who came from Caphtor.

The present discussion concerns the second stage of the traditions: that of group settlement, for which an identical model can be found underlying both the Israelite and Greek traditions. This model is based on the assumption that all settlement is directed by the divine will and must

comply with a series of sacred regulations. Thus, in both cultures, we find that priority was given to the erection of a temple on the site of the new settlement and to the division of the land among the tribes by means of divine lot. For example, in the Laws of Plato (745 b-c), we find a description of the founding of a settlement which shows surprising similarity to the account of the Israelite settlement and the division of the land by lot (before the Lord) in the book of Joshua. In Plato’s Laws we read that ‘the lawgiver must find his city as nearly as possible in the centre of the country …’; first, an acropolis (temple) must be established, then, ‘starting from this (the acropolis) he must divide up both the city itself and all the country into twelve portions… And he must divide the citizens also into twelve parts… After this they must also appoint twelve allotments for the twelve gods, and name and consecrate the portion allotted to each god, giving it the name of ‘phyle’, (tribe)’ (Loeb Classical Library). A similar procedure is reflected in the description of the division of the land in Josh. xviii, where the tent of meeting is set up, after which the land is ‘written’ (= delineated) (see below) according to the inheritances of the tribes and divided up by lot before the Lord, at Shiloh (vv. 2-10).

This basic pattern of settlement, which includes the erection of a temple and the division of the land by lot, can be found already in Homeric literature. For example, we read in the Odyssey, Book VI, lines 7 ff. that “Nausithous, the god-like man, brought the Phaeacians out from the enslavement to the Cyclopes, led and settled them in Scheria, built a wall around their city… erected temples to the gods and divided the fields among them.’

Also, we find in the ‘Laws’ of Plato that the land was sacred to the gods and must remain the possession of the family to whom it had been allocated by lot and ‘therefore the man who buys or sells the house-plot of land-plot allotted to him must suffer the penalty attached to this sin. The officials shall inscribe on tablets of cypress-wood written records for future reference, and shall place them in the shrines’ (741 c). This reminds us of the Israelite laws concerning the retaining of property within the tribe (Lev. xxv 23; Num. xxxvi).4

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3 Cf. the liberation of Israel from Egypt.

4 In ancient Greece we also find the conception that the land was given to the tribes by the gods. Thus we read the inscription from Colophon at Lydia: ‘It was decided by the people to include within the area of the city, in addition to the present city, the ancient city which the gods gave to our ancestors so that they might build altars and temples’; see B. D. Meritt, ‘Inscriptions of Colophon’, American Journal of Philology 56 (1935), p. 361.