SHECHEM AND LEAGUE SHRINES

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It has been remarked that an investigation of the various topographical features of Ancient Shechem as recorded in the Bible suggest that it was the site of a significant cult centre in pre-Israelite times. Further these features, in brief holy mountain at the centre of the world, exemplified in a “navel stone”, with sacred tree and source of living water, indicate something of the imagination of the “myth” proper to the place 1). The image relates to the “concentration” of life and its renewing, and may be readily understood in a natural, a cosmic, a mystic or an ethic fashion. The tree of life sustained by the waters of life growing on/flowing out of or by the “navel”, the primordial swelling or mountain: the vertical axis which unites all states of existence and about which all appearances move.

This imagination is of widespread occurrence; a fact which may be appreciated by drawing attention to the obvious parallels manifested between Shechem and Delphi, e.g. “Centrally situated in their respective regions each is a natural place for solemn convocation and this centricity is underlined by the claim to be at the “navel of the earth”. “Both are places where the divine purpose is made manifest” etc. And it was noted that “Such points of resemblance could be extended” 2). In view of current interests in Shechem it may be now opportune to extend these resemblances in one aspect—the political.

In archaic Greece a type of political association existed which is referred to as an “amphictyony” or “an amphictyonic league”. This took the form of a league of states surrounding (etymologically, originally ἄμφικτονες = dwelling around) a religious centre. The member states were represented by delegates (amphictyons) who met

2) v. ibid., pp. 75-6.
regularly to decide matters of common policy arising from the amphictyonic oath—i.e. a religious cult centre acted as catalyst for a political institution 1). Although several such institutions enter the historical record, undoubtedly the most famous was that of Delphi 2). Now a generation ago it was put forward that the corporate existence of Israel with its duodecimal "tribal division"—was a political foundation effected through the existing machinery of a central religious sanctuary. Thus the institution of Israel formed an analogy with the amphictyony of the Classical World and the central sanctuary in question was, of course, Shechem 3).

On the testimony of the Bible the association of the various units comprising Israel was effected by way of a "covenant" 4). The word covenant (Berith) is a biblical leitmotiv occurring almost 300 times, used figuratively and literally, in season and out of season. It is a flood gate which lets in a torrent of contemporary literature. Fortunately it is not essential to the purpose in hand to rehearse the question of the relevance of "the covenant" to the corporate existence of Israel 5). However with so much by way of introduction it is possible

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2) Cf. Parke and Wormell, pp. 100 ff.
3) v. M. Noth, Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels, Stuttgart, 1930. The idea has been taken up in all subsequent literature relevant to the issue. Whatever view may be entertained concerning the formation and function of the units composing the historical Hebrew people, it must be accepted that these units are a conglomeration effected essentially by socio-political action under the bond of religion. Consanguinity doubtless played no more part in their association than it did with the reformed "tribes" of Attica. For an assessment of the validity of the analogy between the Palestinian and Greek institutions cf. B. D. Ratjen, "Philistine and Hebrew Amphictyonies" in J.N.E.S. XXIV, 1965, pp. 100-104.
4) The English word covenant (convenire = coming together) has so apt a colouring for this discussion, that it is well to point out in advance that the Hebrew Berith has a difficult, debated and in any event quite other etymology. Nonetheless the idea of an association and the formality by which it is created and sustained seem to occur together as closely as in English where they form almost a doublet cf. Solemn League and Covenant (1643), The League of Nations Covenant (1919).
5) There are two views. That a "covenant formality" for "international" agreements and associations was an institution of the Ancient Middle East which was readily applied to and adopted by the Hebrews for their own political and religious needs. Or that the concept of a covenant as establishing the religious community of Israel is a development of later "legalism" applied anachronistically in the biblical accounts of the foundations.

The standard exposition is in G. E. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East, Pittsburgh 1955 (conveniently summarised in "Covenant Forms in Israelite Traditions", B.A., 1954 3 XVII, pp. 50-76). He is the protagon-