DAVID'S CENSUS AND THE TRIPARTITE THEORY

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Over a period of many years, G. Dumézil, with a number of associates, has developed a theory according to which an ideological pattern is to be discerned in mythical, ritual and hymnic traditions from all over the Indo-European world, representing three orders ("functions") within society, in order of precedence sovereign and priestly, military, economic, by means of three corresponding orders among the gods. Institutional tensions between different social groups are resolved by myths, and these also express the duties appropriate to each group, legitimating its role within society. Literature from diverse areas is mutually elucidatory (as Vedic from Irish, Roman from Iranian, and so forth) offering a control for the theory. While threefold patterns are common to many societies, Dumézil's theory proposes that it is only in the Indo-European context that it is given a specifically tripartite ideological expression.

In an article published in 1959, J. Brough submitted the theory to a simple test, by inquiring whether such a pattern could be discerned in a non-Indo-European society, treating ancient Israel as an example. He concluded that a number of supposedly distinctive ideological features were in fact to be found in the Old Testament, thus indicating that these were not as distinctive as alleged, but were rather, quoting Dumézil's words against him, due to "la nature des choses". Dumézil replied to Brough's article with some asperity, and it has also been criticized by C. S. Littleton.

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3 The New Comparative Mythology (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 198-201. This study contains a useful bibliography, and traces the development of the theory from its beginnings.
In the course of his treatment, Brough raised the possibility—which he clearly did not take too seriously—that an Indo-European element might have crept into Israelite and Judahite tradition by way of Hittite contacts, mentioning "the sons of Heth" (Gen. xxiii passim) and Uriah the Hittite, the ill-starred husband of Bathsheba (p. 83). While I do not find his treatment of Old Testament texts at all satisfactory, I believe that he had a point in these allusions, although he appears not to have been aware of their precise implications. I do not propose to examine his treatment of the various examples he discusses, since many of them seem to me to be either contrived or too general to have much force ("la nature des choses" p. 76), but his reference to Gideon and his mariannu warriors is of some interest, and may be argued to provide a test-case, either of Brough's proposition that the tripartite theory is not tenable, because the ideology is found more widely (and where is one to stop?), or of the possibility which I want to explore, that traces of Indo-European ideology are to be found in the Old Testament precisely because of ethnic and cultural influence from that quarter.

Before we come to Gideon, and consider issues of a strictly ethnic nature, I want to draw attention to a curious narrative which seems to contain elements of the ideology. When upon his capture of Jerusalem David sets about the formal organization of his double kingdom, he naturally enough begins with a census of the people, despite the misgivings of his commander-in-chief Joab. But the returns are hardly in, when David himself has misgivings, and the prophet Gad comes to him with a message from Yahweh:

"Are three years of famine to come on you in your country", he said, "or will you flee for three months before your pursuing enemy, or would you rather have three days' pestilence in your country?" (2 Sam. xxiv 13: Jerusalem Bible; cf. 1 Chron. xxi 12)

It is tempting to see in this passage a reference to the three functions of Dumézil's theory in reverse order: famine representing the failure of the third, economic function of food-production, war representing the baneful effects of the activity of the second, military function, and the plague, a mysterious and to a prescientific world an inexplicable disease suggesting a breakdown in the order of cosmic management of the first function (to which may be compared the role of Varuṇa as punisher of sin). The time to be allotted to each visitation is in diminishing order (three years,