

ISRAEL IN THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES. Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 29. A. D. H. Mayes. S.C.M. Press, London, 1974. 156 pp. £2.50.

One of the most influential ideas in recent biblical scholarships, summarised in the first chapter of this book, is the theory of the Israelite amphictyony put forward by the late Martin Noth. Israel, so the theory goes, began to exist as a nation only in the period of the judges and as the outcome of the covenant sealed at Shechem as described in Josh. 24. It then emerged as a loose confederation of twelve tribes based on a central sanctuary where they held periodic festivals and which they were obliged to maintain and defend. A representative of each tribe, known as a *nasi*, attended at the sanctuary. Each of the twelve tribes was responsible for the upkeep of the shrine for one month of the year. The confederation had laws of its own, some though not all of which have survived in the Book of the Covenant, Ex. 20:22-23:33. It also had measures for punishing any of its members who violated its laws, and an instance of such punishment is the war of the tribes against the Benjaminite city of Gibeah described in Judges 19-21. The laws were administered and applied by national 'judges of Israel'. The tribal confederation thus formed was similar in structure to the amphictyonies (likewise generally of twelve members) known to have existed in Greece and Italy.

In developing this theory Noth used methods of traditio-historical analysis which he himself had largely pioneered. The present work consists of a careful reappraisal and critique of the whole theory and of the evidence on which it is based. Dr Mayes submits Noth's arguments to a detailed scrutiny under the following five heads: the tribal lists, the central sanctuary, the judge of Israel, the tribal borders, war in the period of the judges. He concluded that the theory is not really supported by any of the evidence presented under these heads. On the contrary, throughout the period of the judges Israel exhibits a religious and social unity of a kind which can only derive from pre-settlement days. For after the settlement the tribes were, in effect, divided into three groups, northern, mid-Palestinian and southern, separated by two barriers of hostile territory controlled by the surviving city states of the Canaanites and Philistines. For most of the period of the judges, therefore, they were in no position to

unite at a central sanctuary in the manner envisaged by Noth. It was not until these barriers were breached, first in the north by the defeat of Sisera, and later in the south by the victories of Saul over the Philistines, that the tribal groups were able to re-unite. Until then their sense of religious and national unity had had to survive a long period of physical separation.

Israel had already found her national unity, then, long before the period of the judges, and specifically at Kadesh. It was here, Dr Mayes contends, that the various clans and tribes involved first came to acknowledge Yahweh as their God and that Israel as the people of Yahweh began to exist.

It might legitimately be objected that the tribal unity here ascribed to the Israel of Kadesh itself in turn presupposes a still earlier ethnic and religious unity, however embryonic. Recent work by Beyerlin, Wright and de Vaux, for example, surely tends to show this. On this point Dr Mayes' general conclusions seem far too baldly stated. For the rest, they do contribute further and valuable confirmation of positions already widely held. Other scholars, following quite different paths, have likewise been brought back to Kadesh as a supreme creative moment in Israel's life, though not the moment of its absolute origins. Yet the importance and, to the reviewer, the supreme interest of this book is that it illustrates how an acute and careful scholar can meet Noth on his own ground of traditio-historical analysis and, so to say, beat him at his own game. Like all great pioneering work Noth's researches in this field, and even his general approach, call urgently for exactly this kind of critical reappraisal and revision in order that what is of lasting importance in them may be preserved. More positively, in his third chapter, Dr Mayes traces the stages by which the Israelite tribes achieved a new or renewed unity, leading eventually to the monarchy, in their wars against the Canaanites and Philistines during the latter part of the period of the judges. Here he appears to be summarising ideas which he has already worked out more fully and, to me, convincingly in an earlier article, and which are of the highest interest and importance.

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