1

Early Israel as an Anti-Imperial Community

Norman K. Gottwald

Early Israel was born as an anti-imperial resistance movement that broke away from Egyptian and Canaanite domination and took the shape of a self-ruled community of free peasants. This often overlooked, revolutionary origin of Israel is a story that can be told by spelling out the sharp contrast between the vaunted empires of antiquity and the sovereign tribal life of early Israel, characterized by its unrelenting determination to provide dignity and livelihood for all members of the community.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN EMPIRES

Empires, ancient and modern, share the common feature of being systems of domination imposed parasitically on subject peoples. There are, however, major differences in the forms that empires have taken over time. The major distinction between ancient and modern empires is in the mode of production. Prior to the emergence of capitalism, imperial societies were sharply divided between a powerful centralized state (as in Egypt, Assyria, or Babylonia), which controlled vast stretches of land made up largely of villages engaged in agriculture and animal breeding. These villages contained up to 98 percent of the populace. There was

nothing approximating a middle class, no mediating buffer between rich and poor.

Empires were built up as the more powerful states conquered other lands and imposed costly tribute in the form of precious metals, luxury goods, and agricultural produce. This tended to create a two-tier tributary system. For example, when the Assyrian emperors conquered the monarchies of Israel and Judah, they demanded tribute. Israelite monarchs were hard driven to raise the tribute. Since in an agrarian society the primary source of wealth was the peasantry, the recourse of kings was to increase the tax burden laid on their own subjects in order to cover both ongoing national expenses and the tribute due to the empire. Already hard-pressed peasants were abruptly required to yield tribute to two regimes—to both their native rulers and the Assyrian overlord. This was "double taxation" with a vengeance.

A closer look at the socioeconomic disparities in these empires reveals a ruling class that drew its wealth from the labor products of peasants and herders, craftsmen, and traders. This wealth funded a lavish lifestyle for the ruling class and its priests, scribes, and bureaucrats; provided for architectural investments in palaces, temples, fortifications, and other monuments; and at the same time mounted an army that could defend or expand the imperial conquests. A circle of merchants and absentee landlords, not technically a part of government, enjoyed state support and collaboration. To be a part of this ruling class establishment was to enjoy a comfortable and prosperous standard of living without the need to engage in any productive labor on behalf of society, and to entertain no obligation to those under rule other than to assure that underlings were able to produce sufficient wealth to sustain the class privilege.

Even in the necessity of maintaining a healthy peasant populace, ruling classes sometimes failed when their harsh rule drained the energy and morale of the populace, thereby contributing to the collapse of their regimes. As one reads Hosea, Jeremiah, and 2 Kings, it seems likely that the fall both of the northern and southern kingdoms (Israel and Judah alike) was facilitated in part by the exhaustion of its peoples, oppressed not only by the Assyrians and neo-Babylonians, but by their own leadership.

The life circumstances of those outside the ruling establishment were separated from their masters by an immense gulf. To be sure, the state granted "use ownership" of the land to the peasants, but it retained

entitlement to tax the villages, first in the form of payments in kind and second in the form of conscription of labor for public works or military service. Often the tax quota was laid on an entire village, and the local officials had to raise the demanded amount. Internal corruption occurred when tax gatherers and village headmen took possession of goods and produce over and above the quota assigned them by the central government.

Many peasants, already living on the margin of subsistence in the semiarid Near Eastern environment, were further impoverished and driven into debt by these harsh annual exactions. They had little choice but to take out loans at staggering interest rates offered by a money-lending class of merchants and absentee landlords. The debtor was obligated to pay back the value of the loan out of the forthcoming harvest, plus the "value-added" interest. Repayment of loans depended on prosperous harvests—on harvests that often failed due to drought, floods, disease, and the ravages of warfare. Foreclosure on debts could force peasants into debt servitude, one-sided client relationships with their patron lenders, or outright loss of land that turned them into day laborers or beggars. The claims that small cultivators might entertain against the wealthy loan sharks got little hearing in a court system rife with bribery.

The onerous taxes and the unjust loans combined to form a "double whammy" from which there was little hope of escape. The rulers of state and empire cared for their hardworking subjects only to the extent that they be kept alive to keep on laboring for "god and king." Indeed, religion was the capstone in the authority system of ancient empires. Rulers served at the pleasure of the gods. Obedience to the gods necessitated obedience to rulers and their designated authority figures. The rationale for imperial domination was a religious rationale. Ideology, understood as the justification for power relationships, "explains" how and why "things are as they are." The justification would run something like this: "You want to stay in good graces with the gods, to be delivered of disease and death? Pay heed! You will merit divine favor and protection only if you obey and serve the king and his minions, for it is they whom the gods have appointed as their agents on earth!" Indeed, in the Egyptian mode of religious ideology, the pharaoh was actually conceived of as divine when representing the gods in ceremonial functions. In short, "sacrifices" to the gods called for their unquestioned counterpart in "sacrifices" to the power holders.

Although those ancient conditions are not in all particulars precisely like those today, differing principally due to greatly advanced technology and the formal separation of politics and economics under capitalism, the political economies of many third-world countries exhibit abusive and degrading features very much like those of the ancient tributary system. Just as ancient imperial regimes siphoned off the produce of distant peasant villages to support the lavish lifestyle and monuments of the court, so today's multinational conglomerates divert resources from small cultivators, artisans, and working people to the profits of agribusiness, energy, and finance corporations.

These glaring parallels between ancient and modern political economies help to explain why Bible readers in third-world countries and among the working class in the West are often much quicker to grasp the stark realities of biblical economics than those of us in more protected economic environments where inequities and hardships are masked and often denied. This also helps to explain why "uneducated" third-world peasants and workers can grasp the claims of social and economic justice as advanced in Latin American, South African, and related liberation theologies. In stark contrast, these liberating theologies, palpable to the poor, continue to baffle a large number of first-world intellectuals, who put up an enormous resistance and denial to the state of economic and social suffering imposed by the wielders of wealth and power in today's world.

For Jews and Christians who regularly read, teach, and preach the Hebrew Bible, the tributary political economy described above should be no surprise. Torah, prophets, psalms, and Wisdom literature teem with the symptoms of economic destitution; of the suborning of the justice system; with examples of social, political, and even religious leaders indifferent to or complicit in the system of oppression. The Torah legislates against many socioeconomic injustices. The prophets castigate the country's leaders for countenancing or participating in the rape of the rural populace. The psalms express the heartfelt pain of victims who find their only recourse in appeals to God. The Wisdom literature bewails an unjust world in which power and status so often accrue to those who wrong others.

Despite all this textual evidence, it is a common strategy of Bible readers to view these ills as the personal failings of people that could be corrected if they individually had a change of heart. There is gross

failure to recognize that deplorable injustices were deeply embedded in the very structure of the ancient Near Eastern political economy. These injustices often escape the eye of the Bible reader, the religious educator, and the preacher. It is sobering, for example, to realize that leaders of "strong" ancient Near Eastern states and empires were totally dependent for their very existence on oppressing their subjects. Since they produced no wealth of their own, these rulers could not have survived without sucking up the wealth of their populace.

Moreover, Bible readers often fail to consider the particular circumstances of political economies in ancient Israel, easily falling subject to mistaken readings of texts. For instance, the reading of Deuteronomy 15 is regularly perverted by highlighting, "the poor will never cease out of the land" (Deut 15:11) to the neglect of the accompanying dictum, "but there will be no poor among you" (Deut 15:4).[1] Far from justifying poverty as a virtual natural phenomenon, the text is clearly saying that there will always be people who fall into poverty, but they must be cared for by an openhanded and openhearted community (Deut 15:7–10).

What tends to be overlooked by Bible readers is that the social, economic, political, and religious abuses relentlessly condemned in biblical texts are in large measure by-products of the tributary political economy in which Israelites, over their long history, fully participated once they adopted kingship under David and Solomon. Israel and Judah were repeatedly subject to parasitic kings, landlords, and merchants in their midst and also to the incursions of empire from Assyria, Egypt, Neo-Babylonia, and Persia. So it is remarkable that the utopian hope for a just society should have persisted among them. Given Israel's immersion in tributary political economies, both native and foreign, it is indeed a marvel that so much of its literature is adamantly critical of the effects of the tributary system and hopeful of a liberative form of communal life.

Of course it is obvious that some strands of biblical literature are supportive of the tributary system, and even celebrate it, principally the texts that praise the just rule of kings, in sharp contrast to the dismal record of kingship recounted in the books of Kings. It is also probable that Israel's image of God as supreme monarch, calling for the adoration and gifts of his people, may have inclined many Israelites to accept the tributary rule under which they suffered as ordained of God. More often, however, the biblical witnesses turn the anger and justice of God against

1. All biblical translations are my own.

the tributary injustices, which the deity will punish sooner or later. The problem of "deferred justice" mounts steadily in Israelite history as God is held accountable for the injustices that belie divine intentionality—this is forcefully expressed in Jeremiah, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

But, if the Bible has such discomfort with the tributary political economy, what alternative does it propose? As a religious document it does not offer a ready-to-hand blueprint for a better system in contrast to sharp critique of the present system. This critique stems, in large measure, from the social formation of earliest Israel as a "tribal" people who did not operate within the tributary political economy of the day. Whatever form of political economy one might find supported by the biblical critique, it would necessarily provide for the physical and spiritual welfare of all the folk embraced by the social order and not simply for those who happen to be rulers of the moment.

To further understand the historic emergence of Israel, it is necessary to describe the tributary political economy of the Egyptian empire and its Canaanite vassals in the midst of which Israel arose.

ISRAEL AND EGYPTIAN DOMINION IN CANAAN

It is generally agreed that Israel emerged in Canaan in the approximate period between 1250 and 1000 BCE. At that time Canaan was under the nominal control of the Egyptian empire. The aims of the Egyptian domination of Canaan were two: (1) to provide a buffer against attack from rival powers in Mesopotamia (Mitanni) and Anatolia (Hittites); and (2) to secure trade and tribute in the form of grain and timber, as well as tolls on transit trade on the major highways that connected Egypt and Arabia with the Levant and Mesopotamia.

The Egyptian empire was more loosely administered than the subsequent empires with whom Israel had to contend. The basic mode of control was to impose vassal status on the scores of small to midsize kingdoms that dotted the landscape of Syro-Palestine. The obligations of these vassals were regular payment of tribute, provisioning of Egyptian troops stationed in or passing through their territories, and mustering auxiliary troops as necessary to assist the Egyptian army in its military campaigns.

Although pharaoh's armies gained hegemony over Palestine and parts of southern Syria, Egyptian control over Canaan was constantly under threat of destabilization and dissolution. To counter the tendency

of the vassal city-states to renege on their duties and to fight with one another, the Egyptians employed two strategies: (1) they undertook periodic military campaigns into Canaan to punish recalcitrant vassals and to reassert Egypt's imperial authority; and (2) they installed Egyptian "governors" at a number of garrisoned sites in an attempt to ensure loyalty among the vassals.

It is clear, however, from a trove of diplomatic correspondence between Canaanite vassals and the Egyptian royal court, dated ca. 1425–1350 BCE, that Egypt's hold on Canaan was so precarious it was unable to prevent lapses in payment of tribute and disruption of agriculture and trade owing to increasing conflict and open warfare among its vassals. Repeated references to a socially and politically marginalized people, known as habiru/apiru, describe them as disturbers of the status quo, often as brigands or as mercenaries in the wars among the city-states, but also as rebels who threaten to overturn the prevailing regimes.

The relation between these habiru and the later emergence of Israel is a matter of continuing discussion. This much can be said about the similarity between the Amarna habiru and the first Israelites: they both represented a trajectory leading to the disruption of imperial control in Canaan. Although it remains a matter of dispute whether biblical *ʿibrim* is linguistically equivalent to Akkadian *ḫabiru* = Egyptian *ʿapiru*, a number of biblical occurrences of "Hebrew/s" appear in social, political, and military contexts and display affinities with the habiru as described in extrabiblical texts. Abraham, called "the Hebrew," commands a band of 318 warriors, contrary to his peaceful role as a family head elsewhere in tradition (Gen 14:14). The pharaoh who "knows not Joseph" is terrified of "the Hebrews" as rapidly breeding vermin who threaten to destroy Egypt (Exod 1:8–22). The terms of service for the biblical Hebrew slave may have a parallel in contracts from the Mesopotamian city of Nuzi, in which habiru attached themselves in servitude to Nuzi citizens (Exod 21:2–11). In the battle that Saul and Jonathan wage against the Philistines, a group of "Hebrews"—distinguishable both from Israel and from the Philistines—wavers in its allegiance until it sees that Israel is prevailing (1 Sam 13:3–7a; 14:21–23a).

In sum, while no direct line of continuity is traceable from the Amarna habiru to the early Israelites about 150 years later, it is likely that early Israel included descendants of the Amarna habiru. So, while not all Israelites were habiru, it is reasonable to hypothesize that a fair number

of them were of habiru descent and were so regarded by Egyptian and Philistine enemies when they refer to them derisively as "Hebrews." The major difference is that the habiru seem never to have formed a cohesive community within a specific territory, whereas early Israel was a coalition of tribes spread over the western highlands of Canaan and northern Transjordan.

The Hittite Empire of Anatolia penetrated northern Syria, and after an indecisive battle at Kadesh (ca. 1274) the Hittites and the Egyptians "froze" their conflicting imperial designs by entering a treaty renouncing further hostile actions against one another (ca. 1259). This was the high-water mark of Egyptian expansion into Asia. In subsequent decades, Merneptah and Rameses III undertook campaigns to shore up Egyptian control and influence in Canaan but with declining success. Egypt's weakening grip on Canaan was cut short by the arrival of the migrating Sea Peoples between 1200 and 1165. The entrance of the Indo-European Sea Peoples, which included the Philistines, set in motion a complicated power dynamic involving Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines in the midst of which Israel made its first recorded appearance.

EXODUS AS METAPHOR FOR ISRAEL'S ANTI-IMPERIAL ORIGINS

Discussion of the origins of early Israel inevitably entails the problematic historicity of the exodus from Egypt and conquest of Canaan. The biblical traditions in Exodus through Judges that recount these events are permeated with the grandiose, iconic style of legend, and, if taken as actual history, describe happenings and beliefs that are anachronistic or implausible. Significantly, apart from the Bible, there is no mention of these events, and they are incongruent with what we do know of that period of Egyptian history from ancient written sources and from archaeology.

Nonetheless, the biblical tradition about "exodus" is to be taken seriously as a symbolic projection that affirms Israel's "exiting, going forth" from imperial oppression in Canaan. Likewise the "conquest" of Canaan is a symbolic projection of Israel's "coming to independent self-rule" in the highland territories of Canaan. The context for the processes and the metaphors encapsulating them is broadly describable.

The so-called Israel stele of pharaoh Merneptah (ca. 1212–1202) describes his defeat of "Israel" during a military campaign in Canaan

toward the end of the thirteenth century BCE. There is good reason to accept this account of a military clash between Egyptian forces and at least a portion of early Israelites. Moreover, during the two centuries between the Israel stele and founding of the Israelite monarchy, archaeology has uncovered a proliferation of small agrarian/pastoral villages in the highlands in areas extensively referred to in the Bible as settled by Israelites.

While nothing in the material remains "proves" that these were Israelite settlements, it is a sound inference that it was this region and its populace that formed the demographic and material resource base of the first Israelite state. The predominance of clusters of single-family dwellings, together with an absence of fortifications and public buildings, suggests local social organization intent on adaptation to a marginal environment for subsistence farming and herding. The biblical portrait of "tribes," with shifting leadership beyond the local level, is broadly accordant with the archaeological data. In short, while Joshua and Judges do not yield a linear historical account with reliable references to time and place, they do reflect a social and cultural process that expresses the ethos of early Israel.

Merneptah's campaign, and other Egyptian thrusts into Canaan during the following century, may be the historical and political matrix of the traditional motifs of Israel's bondage in and deliverance from Egypt. Continuing Egyptian imperial claims to Canaan affected its populace differentially. The more populous and productive lowland city-states were more highly regarded by Egypt as sources of wealth, and valuable as way stations on the major trade routes. By contrast, the less populous hill country, with minimal resources and off the main trade routes, was less vulnerable to direct Egyptian intervention. Moreover, because of their disunity, the lowland city-states were limited in their efforts to pacify and impose tribute on the highland settlers, a majority of whom had fled the lowlands to find political and economic security. A political and military vacuum arose in which the highlanders could astutely cooperate to keep both the Egyptians and the city-states at bay.

We can account for the foundational traditions of exodus and conquest in the following manner. From the Israelite perspective, the immediate threat from the Canaanite city-states, themselves vassals of Egypt, overlapped with and was driven by the more distant threat from Egypt, inasmuch as both the city-states and Egypt pursued tribute-demanding

policies that struck at the heart of the independent livelihood of free agrarians and pastoralists in the hill country. In the twelfth century BCE the Egyptian-Canaanite city-state dominion was taken over by the Philistines, who came to ascendancy on the southwest coast of Canaan and extended their control over the old Canaanite city-states. After Egypt repelled the attack of the Sea Peoples on the Nile Delta, Egyptian imperial policy appears to have supported settlement of the Philistine component of the Sea Peoples in coastal Canaan, where they might serve Egyptian interests. In a sense then, the Israelites faced a hegemonic threat that was conceived by them as embracing Egyptian, Canaanite, and Philistine agents, shifting variously according to the balance of power among these politically centralized peoples.

In terms of the formation of early Israelite tradition, what appears to have happened is that all these hostile relations with Egypt and with Egyptian surrogates in Canaan were gathered up into the paradigm of a single mass captivity in Egypt, and, similarly, all the successes of Israelites in overcoming Egyptian-Canaanite-Philistine control of Canaan were condensed and projected into the paradigm of a single mass deliverance from Egypt, which in turn generated conquest traditions that pictured Israel as coming from outside Canaan.

In short, the formulation of the themes of exodus-conquest need not have been dependent on any actual Israelite presence in Egypt but rather represent a "root metaphor" appropriate to the harsh political, social, and economic obstacles that the Israelite peasants and herders were forced to overcome in order to become a viable community in highland Canaan.

THE ANTI-IMPERIAL STRUCTURE OF ISRAELITE SOCIETY

Early Israel arose as an anti-hierarchic movement, socially in its formation by tribes and politically in its opposition to payment of tribute, military draft, and state corvée. This means that early Israel not only rejected the right of outside states and empires to rule over them but also refused to set up a state structure of its own. Its form of self-rule would be what some anthropologists have called "regulated anarchy," there being no single center of power but numerous power interests negotiating a tenuous unity. Exactly how we are to conceive the decentralized social organization remains a vexed issue.

The provisions for land to cultivate and for just dealings in everyday life exerted a leveling influence that can be described as roughly "egalitarian," or at least "communitarian." There is evidence that some, but not all, of the tribes had chiefs, which made them ranked communities but not yet possessed of coercive political power. Religious belief and practice was carried on in homes or outside settings, sacrifice being offered both by priests and laity as occasion suited. The cult of Yahweh both struggled against and borrowed from Canaanite cults. The unity of the tribes assumed by the Bible was in fact fragile from the beginning, and their determination to persevere in their sociopolitical project was in large part motivated by the sentiment attributed to Benjamin Franklin: "we must all hang together or we shall assuredly all hang separately."

The antipathy of early Israelites to centralized political structures is exhibited in their mockery of the brutality, incompetence, and misrule of kings, as expressed in the narratives about the king of Jericho (Josh 2:1–4), the Canaanite ruler Adonibezek (Judg 1:5–7), the Edomite king Eglon (Judg 3:5–25), and the rise and fall of Abimelech, the would-be king of Israel (Judges 8). The military leader Gideon is said to have erred in making an image, but he is credited with refusing to accept the role of king that some of his troops proposed. As he succinctly put it, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you, Yahweh will rule over you" (Judg 8:23).

The abiding strength of the antihierarchic (and thus anti-imperialist) sentiment in Israel comes to expression repeatedly in the struggle over acceptance of monarchy and in the record of particular kings. The crowning blow against the arrogance and self-inflation of kings is brilliantly etched in Jotham's fable about the trees that set out to anoint a king over them, offering kingship in succession to the "olive tree," "the fig tree," and the "grapevine." All three scornfully reject the offer because they do not wish to abandon their socially constructive roles as providers of food and drink. However, the nonproductive "bramble" readily agrees to serve as king and ludicrously offers refuge to the trees in its "shade," which of course the scraggily bramble does not possess (Judg 9:7–15). The lesson the satirically artful fable delivers is that kings are socially and economically worse than useless, can only make false or misleading promises to their subjects, and in the end bring destruction on those who rely on them.

The defeat of a coalition of Canaanite kings by Israelite peasants, drawn from six tribes, is recounted in poetic and prose versions (Judges 4–5). Four other tribes, more distant from the battle site, are scorned for their failure to participate. A proper translation of Judg 5:6–7 (cf. NRSV with RSV) shows that the immediate occasion of the battle was the success of Israelites in hijacking and looting military and commercial caravans passing through their territory. A sharp contrast is drawn between the underequipped Israelite foot soldiers and the Canaanite chariots, which are neutralized by a storm that immobilizes them. The Canaanite general, seeking to escape, is killed by a Kenite woman who identifies with Israel, even though the Kenites are allegedly at peace with the Canaanites (Judg 4:17). Psalm 68:11–14 makes fragmentary allusion to a similar victory over Canaanite kings fought in the vicinity of Shechem. The Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 proclaims the reversal of fortune that occurs when Yahweh intervenes to foil the military might of kings, to feed the poor who have gone hungry, and to empower them to rule in place of the plundering rich. The decision of Joshua to hamstring captured horses that pulled chariots (Josh 11:9) is contrasted with the rashness of Levites in hamstringing oxen, which were highly valued draft animals in an agrarian society (Gen 49:5–7).

The material cultural evidence from archaeology is instructive of the contrast between imperial and anti-imperial agrarian economies. Significant strides have been made in identifying the settlement patterns of the highland villages as they adapted to the available arable soil and water necessary to sustain their fragile subsistence economy centered on cereals, fruits, and vegetables, supplemented by animal husbandry. Plowing, harvesting, and food processing technologies were simple, dependent mainly on wood, bone, and bronze tools and a growing but still limited supply of iron. Cisterns caught the seasonal rainfall, and grain was stored in rock-hewn silos. Terraced hillsides maximized land available for cultivation and water retention. Buildings were residential with little evidence of larger public structures. Trade was mostly limited to regional goods. The archaeological mapping of the material culture has been supplemented by studies of contemporary highland rain agriculture that yield a profile of the seasonal cycle of rural life, with implications for the kind of social cooperation possible and necessary under such conditions.

Lest we be misled by the inflated biblical population numbers, rough estimates suggest a startup population of about 20,000 to 30,000 that may have tripled by the dawn of the monarchy. This is an enormous but realistic diminution of the traditional claim that 600,000 Israelite males, plus women and children, departed Egypt (Exod 12:37).

The mode of production in early Israel was communitarian, in contrast to the tributary mode of production practiced in Egypt and the Canaanite city-states. Israelite peasants, freed from the domination of central government, enjoyed their agricultural and pastoral surpluses without taxation by nearby city-states or tribute paid to Egypt. Loans in kind to assist impoverished farmers were offered without interest. In sectors of Israel where chieftains may have held office, a portion of goods produced would be supplied the chief for ceremonial purposes and to redistribute as necessary among the needy. Priests were similarly recompensed for their services. In short, the surpluses of free producers were not supporting the state and empire but were directly consumed, bartered, or shared in a system of mutual aid. Given the harshness of terrain and climate, Israelite producers did not have an easy life, but, compared to peasants subject to the control of state and empire, they were advantaged and, at the same time, inspirited with a sense of dignity and self-worth.

Communitarian agriculture not only escaped the imposition of taxes, tribute, and onerous loans, but also avoided state imposition of agricultural strategies that served the elite at the cost of the primary cultivators. It was in the interest of state and empire to invest heavily in colonial one-crop economies, such as cereals or wine, either for consumption at the metropolitan centers or for trade on the international market, to secure scarce items such as timber and precious metals. The imposition of one-crop export agriculture worked hardship on peasants who depended upon a diversity of crops and animal husbandry to sustain a healthy life. Pressure from the political center was exerted to develop large single-crop estates by expropriation of small farmers through excessive taxation and inflated interest on loans.

Israelite cultivators were free of such burdens on their livelihood. However, the Philistines, once established in the lowlands, sought to turn the Israelite highlands into a source of tribute. Had the Philistines prevailed, it would have meant the end of economic and political independence for the Israelite tribes. It was this somber prospect that

moved them to appoint Saul as commander in chief, which launched an incremental process of political centralization leading to the oppressive regime of Solomon. This was not an inevitable process, but one that seems to have unfolded without any of the participants being fully aware of where it was leading. In the end, both the winners and the losers in the establishment of the state were probably greatly surprised at the outcome, both in delight and in disappointment.

THE ANTI-IMPERIAL LEGACY OF EARLY ISRAEL

It is commonly believed that once Israel adopted the monarchic form of government under Saul, David, and Solomon, previous modes of social organization in Israel were effaced. It is certainly true that growing political centralization had drastic effects upon Israelite society, but the state was not in a position to suppress or obliterate altogether the communitarian spirit and practice of the rural folk who constituted more than 90 percent of the population, especially since its motivating ideology was the belief in Yahweh as a liberating deity. As a matter of fact, the newly introduced state was so unpopular that it depended greatly on a resort to the anti-imperial cult of Yahweh to validate itself. To adopt Yahwism required, however, that the cult of a liberating god had to be turned on its head. Yahweh's former rejection of kingship and political hierarchy was replaced by the assertion that Yahweh chose the king of Israel as his agent and "adopted son" in order to secure justice at home and victory in wars abroad.

In the move to monarchy, peasant traditions of Yahweh as the sole sovereign over Israel were "hijacked" in order to underwrite a form of tributary political economy at odds with the premonarchic society of ancient Israel. In an astonishing reversal, the authority of state and empire that tribal Israel fiercely resisted in the name of Yahweh, was now invoked to give religious blessing to the newly formed state of Israel. Royal propaganda promoted a critical distinction between the maligned Egyptian empire and Canaanites city-states and a beneficent state apparatus in the hands of Israelites rather than foreigners. This royal ideology was of course strongly opposed by many, possibly most, Israelites. The early tension between pro- and anti tributary forces, already evident in the books of Samuel, launched a struggle between communitarian and hierarchic understandings of God, society, economy, polity, and religion that extended throughout biblical history and beyond.

Moreover, it is my judgment that the early communitarian life of Israel was responsible for shaping the subsequent course of the Israelite and Jewish peoples in profound ways. For one thing, the communitarian life of early Israel lent strength to the later prophetic movement by providing a template of just community that sharply challenged the gross abuses of the monarchy and the ostentatious greed of the client classes of big landowners and merchants, who behaved like the tributary power figures of surrounding nations—crushing the very peasants whose produce provided them with the prosperous life they enjoyed. Should the peasant surplus have been denied them, the state would have collapsed.

In short, the Israelite form of tributary political economy was not fundamentally different in practice from the tributary system throughout the ancient Near East. The major difference was that in Israel the intense opposition to tributary oppression found repeated expression, not only among prophets, but also among priests and sages and even members of the political establishment.

The Deuteronomistic tradition (Deuteronomy through Kings) offers an exceedingly damning picture of Israelite royal rule, relieved only by occasional short-lived reform measures. The Deuteronomic and prophetic critiques may be thought of as emerging from outside the political establishment. Yet even from within the traditions that articulate the royal ideology there is a nervous anxiety haunting many texts. The high praise for royalty's devotion to peace and justice is tempered by a measure of doubt as to the actual performance of the monarchy.

This equivocation about native tributary rule is particularly evident in the songs that celebrate kingship. In the so-called "last words of David," the monarch proclaims:

> When one rules justly over men,
> ruling in the fear of God,
> he dawns on them like the morning light,
> like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,
> like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.
> (2 Sam 23:3b–4)

This lyrical celebration of the close fit between divine justice and royal rule is followed by an overwrought royal plea for approval from his subjects, cast ambivalently as a rhetorical question, "Yea, does not my house

stand so with God?" (2 Sam 23:5a). The royal speaker clearly hopes for a yes answer, but a space is left open for no, or, maybe so, or, who says so?

Psalm 72 is an impassioned prayer on behalf of the king that he "judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice . . . that he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor!" (Ps 72:2, 4). The text goes on to posit that agricultural abundance and military success are critically dependent on the just rule of the king. Although Ps 72:12–14 may read as simple declaratives stating that the king does indeed practice domestic justice, uncertainty of the outcome attends the vehemence with which God is urged to give justice and righteousness to the king so that he may rule justly.

The psalm is a kind of "perpetual prayer machine" trying to fulfill its plea through ritual recitation. Its royal rhetoric does not succeed in erasing the doubt that lurks just below the surface of the text. Also, it has been noted that the text wholly ignores the tributary labor of the king's subjects on which the socioeconomic superstructure rests. In a curious way, however, it carries the unintended hint of socioeconomic reality, namely, that peasant productivity does rise or fall with just or unjust domestic conditions.

Finally, it is my contention that the anti-imperial origin of Israel is the single most important factor in the astonishing survival of the Jews under centuries of foreign domination, social isolation, and religious persecution. With the fall of both Israelite kingdoms, the community was politically decapitated. This amounted to a forced reversion to non-tributary modes of internal governance that enabled the survivors of the general institutional collapse, both those in Palestine and those in the dispersion, to find resources to carry on their culture and religion without centralized leadership.

When the community was similarly decapitated with the second destruction of Jerusalem, it was the same internalized communitarian ethos that came to the rescue of the people. Drawing on communal resources both deep and broad, rabbinic Judaism forged a mode of disciplined self-rule that protected the community from all the efforts to dissolve it as a foreign body within Roman colonial society or, later on, within a triumphant Christendom.

This twofold rebirth of Israel is the legacy of the anti-imperial stance of earliest Israel, first in the restoration of Judah after "exile,"

and second in the emergence of rabbinic Judaism after the Jewish revolt against Rome. The literary accomplishments of these two Israelite rebirths are, respectively, the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Further, in spite of the Christian drift toward an authoritarian church that could not grant legitimacy to an ongoing Jewish community, the legacy of anti-imperial Israel found expression in a pronounced, sometimes strident, undercurrent of anti-authoritarianism and resistance to oppression within Christian thought and practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

As for the political implications of this legacy for church and synagogue in the face of American empire, the biblical criteria are decidedly dour in their assessment of the triumphalism of current American foreign policy. Of late, many political analysts are citing the Bush administration as broadly replicating the shift in Roman history from republic to empire. If we attempt a similar analogy with reference to ancient Israel, the first thing that strikes me is how readily religious folk equate the United States with Israel as the people of God. Sadly, the equation is grotesque in the extreme. Ancient Israel was a minor petty kingdom in the ancient Near East, and such empire as some Israelites hoped for was purely imaginary.

To make the proper analogical connection, we would have to say that the United States much more nearly approximates the empires of Egypt, Assyria, Neo-Babylonia, Persia, and Rome than it does the tiny kingdoms of Israel and Judah. This means that to envision ourselves as "the people of God," cast in secular terms as "the greatest nation on earth," is to deceptively overlook the enormity of our political and military power compared to the politically weak condition of ancient Israel.

To complete the analogy, the present-day equivalent of ancient Israel might properly be relatively powerless countries like Cuba, Nicaragua, Chile, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Iraq, all of which have been the object of hostility and aggression from the American empire. And in a supreme irony, Palestinians of the West Bank may most nearly approximate the early Israelites since they occupy the same terrain, practice similar livelihoods, and long for deliverance from the "Canaanite" state of Israel backed by the American empire.

Recommended Reading

Berman, Joshua. *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Dever, William G. *Who Were the Early Israelites, and Where Did They Come From?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Dykstra, Laurel A. *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002.

Gottwald, Norman K. *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* 1979. Reprinted, Biblical Seminar 66. Sheffield Academic, 1999.

———. *The Politics of Ancient Israel*. Library of Ancient Israel. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.

Houston, Walter J. *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*. Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 428. London: T. & T. Clark, 2006.

Kessler, Rainer. *The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction*. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.

Knight, Douglas A. *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2nd ed. Biblical Resource Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Walzer, Michael. *Exodus and Revolution*. New York: Basic, 1985.

Yee, Gale A. *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.