
A New Ancient History of Israel

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Source: *Gregorianum*, 1972, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1972), pp. 573-577

Published by: GBPress- Gregorian Biblical Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23575159>

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Fr. Roland de Vaux died quite suddenly in Jerusalem on September 9, 1971, bringing to a close a remarkable career of teaching and writing which spanned a period of almost forty years in the Holy Land. From 1933, when he first came to the Dominican École Biblique in Jerusalem, a steady output of books and articles along with a demanding teaching schedule — to say nothing of a program of public lectures which few could have sustained — established Fr. de Vaux in the front ranks of international scholarship in the Old Testament field. The honors which came to him from various centers of learning and the invitations he received to lecture at countless institutions attest the esteem in which he was held. The present book is the last to come from this indefatigable scholar; it would be impossible to imagine a more suitable valedictory to his colleagues and students. If there is any regret it comes from the realization that the author was unable to see to its conclusion the vast work he had planned. For we have but the first of three volumes he had projected. This book goes from Israel's beginnings down to the establishment of the twelve tribes in the Land of Canaan. A second volume, the first five chapters of which were found among Fr. de Vaux's papers, would cover the period from the Judges to the downfall of the Kingdom of Judah. The third would deal with the exilic and post-exilic periods, coming down to the Conquest of Alexander.

The book under review is divided into two major sections, a Prologue consisting of five chapters which deal with the geographical, historical, ethnic, and cultural background of Israel, and a much larger section, entitled « the Origins of Israel, » comprising three parts which treat, successively, the patriarchal traditions, the traditions on the Egyptian sojourn, Exodus, and Sinai, and finally, the traditions which relate the settlement of the tribes in Canaan. This second section takes up almost four hundred pages and constitutes the bulk of the work. The author's methodology explains the preponderant part given to the traditions,

* R. DE VAUX, O. P., *Histoire Ancienne d'Israel*. Etudes Bibliques. Paris: J. Gabalda, 1971, pp. 674.

both oral and written. To tell Israel's long story, from the beginning until the time of Alexander, presents a unique challenge to the historian. For this people and its inner dynamism can be understood only through a sacred literature whose central and consistent theme is a confrontation between God and this particular community. In other words, we must come to terms with a document of faith and, even when one cannot share that faith, to prescind from it and write a purely secular or profane history of Israel is to ignore a central and formative element in the life of this people. We end up with a distorted history. No objective, critical historian can overlook the fact that a great part of Israel's traditions is preserved as mighty acts of her God. The record, which alone permits access to the real Israel, is substantially a confession of faith: God promised progeny and a land to our Fathers, He brought us out of Egypt and led us into the Land etc. Apart from these events, interpreted from the perspective of faith, all else has little or no significance.

It is primarily to these traditions that de Vaux addresses himself, applying with complete scientific probity the literary and historical criticism necessary for their elucidation. At this point it may be useful to compare briefly De Vaux's historiographical position in relation to two other classic histories of Israel, that of the late Martin Noth and that of John Bright, whose second, revised edition appeared just after the publication of our book. In keeping with the principles of the School of Albrecht Alt, Noth placed primary emphasis upon literary-historical criticism of the traditions. While he certainly did not ignore archaeological evidence which gives perspective to Israel's history he believed that this history began only around 1200 B.C. As for the patriarchal and Mosaic narratives he insisted upon interpreting them, quite negatively, as traditional survivals within the twelve-tribe League where, according to Noth, the biblical traditions were conceived and developed. Bright, in the tradition of the Albright School, recognizes the limitations of the evidence at our disposal but has nonetheless consistently defended the basic historicity of the patriarchal and Mosaic traditions even though detailed reconstructions are no longer possible. Relying heavily upon archaeological evidence Bright argues that the early traditions of Israel are founded firmly upon historical fact. « Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stand in the truest sense at the beginning of Israel's history and faith. Not only do they represent that movement which brought the components of Israel to Palestine, but their particular beliefs helped to shape the faith of Israel as it was later to be ». Fr. de Vaux saw his position as somewhere between Noth and Bright, though asserting that his method, heavily dependent upon literary

criticism, is closer to Noth. Yet he has tried to maintain an equilibrium between criticism of the traditions and archaeological evidence and this has certainly led him to a more positive evaluation of Israel's historical traditions than we find in Noth. I am personally convinced that Bright would accept De Vaux's synthesis with a great deal more enthusiasm than would have Noth or any other disciple of Alt.

To review this enormous compilation of material in any detail is impossible. What we really have in the book are about four major monographs combined into a vast and coherent picture of Israel's origins. The Prologue, for example, is a masterpiece of lucidity and compactness with all the essentials woven into a beautiful tapestry which covers two millenia of history in the ancient Near East. Under those conditions let it suffice to point out some of the author's positions and a few places where the reviewer would hesitate to follow De Vaux. With all the reserve proper to so complicated a problem De Vaux would hold as more probable, in our present state of knowledge, that the patriarchs settled in Canaan sometime in the 19th-18th centuries B.C. As to the continuity in religious belief and cult between the patriarchal El religion and the Yahwism of Moses he marshals reasons for supporting the clear biblical tradition of continuity. Yet for him Yahwism would constitute an enlargement and deepening of the patriarchal faith. Yahwism was a new phenomenon without, however, breaking completely with its patriarchal antecedents. On the etymology and meaning of the sacred name, Yahweh, I still prefer the opinion of Cross and others that «Yahweh» is a causative imperfect, and not a Qal imperfect as De Vaux argues, of the verb *hwy*, with the meaning «he causes to be» or «he creates». On the probability that the name is part of a cult formula addressed to El, viz., *'el dū yahwī*, «El who creates...», for which there exists a significant parallel in Ugaritic *'il milk dū yakāninuhū* «King El who creates...», the causative explanation seems preferable. I would also add that it preserves the biblical idea of Yahweh as «the one who exists», the mysterious and transcendent one, upon which De Vaux insists in his explanation. But it also underscores the cosmic power of Israel's God as the creator of heaven and earth. In addition I would question De Vaux's detaching of the epithet *'El 'Elyon* of *Gn. 14* from the patriarchal religion along with his observation that *Gn. 14* is «une composition savante et tardive» (p. 211). The chapter is indeed an independent source and no clearly defined picture emerges from the narrative. But the very archaic features of the text, which Albright maintained could be put into rough metrical form once the prose features and explanations were eliminated, would lead one to be-

lieve that the story is telling us something that really happened in the history of Abraham.

The discussion of the ancient traditions pertaining to Moses, the Exodus from Egypt and the Sinai events, is superb. There is no decisive reason, the author holds, for detaching Moses from these traditions and plenty of positive proofs that Moses has played a primary role in the events they recall, even though some details are beyond the historian's control. It is true that the latest strata of the traditions have attached to these events and especially to the person of Moses the whole civil and religious legislation of Israel together with its cultic organization. Literary-historical criticism shows how the tradition has attached later developments to the epoch of Moses. But these later extensions rest upon a solid nucleus of fact so that the whole process of expansion becomes unintelligible unless we accept as historically reliable what the earliest traditions report: it was at the time of Moses that Yahweh was recognized as the one who delivered Israel from the bondage of Egypt and then established a unique covenant relationship with her at Sinai. There cannot be the slightest doubt that Moses had an essential part in the formative period of Israel's history and religion.

The establishment of Israel in Canaan during the last centuries of the second millennium B.C. is set against the backdrop of turbulent events unfolding in the ancient Near East. The evidence points to a power struggle which drained the strength of the major contending parties. By the end of the Late Bronze Age Egypt was in rapid decline, the Hittites had been eliminated as an effective force, the Canaanite city-states were intact but undoubtedly weakened by years of Egyptian misrule and exploitation. The Sea People from the Aegean were pushing into Canaan from the west and, east of the Jordan, the Moabites and Edomites settled down during the thirteenth century and the Ammonites had gained a secure foothold in Transjordan in the succeeding century. With this setting as a background De Vaux begins a long and detailed study of the traditions in which Israel described her occupation of the Land. The scheme followed is geographical, moving from southern Palestine to Transjordan, then to central and finally northern Palestine. To the study of these varied and complex traditions he adds an examination of the archaeological evidence. Over the latter no one had greater control than De Vaux.

It should be noted that here we are dealing with a kind of double stratigraphy, literary and archaeological. Both types of evidence represent accumulated layers of older and later material. It is generally conceded, I think, that here the archaeologist has the advantage over the literary critic. For today there is a broad

scholarly consensus on the stratification of Palestinian sites, acquired over long years of excavation and through increasingly refined techniques. Seldom is there a comparable consensus on the literary stratification of the sources. As the late Paul Lapp once observed: « An archaeologist can be reasonably sure that he has separated his layers, but rarely is there a scholarly consensus that a literary critic has satisfactorily separated the strata of his sources ».

The last chapter summarizes the results of the author's painstaking analysis of the occupation traditions, controlled by external evidence. De Vaux places the occupation of Canaan in the second half of the thirteenth century B.C., with the southern tribes coming in around 1250, the northern group around 1200; central Palestine would have felt the first impact of the invaders around 1225. These conclusions are offered with a reserve proper to the complexity and obscurity of our sources; they are subject to revision in the light of new data. Finally, our author recalls that the conquest traditions have been « nationalized » from the time they were first set down in writing. Territories captured and settled by a few tribal groups in very limited military engagements have been attributed to « all Israel ». In this way a national epic was born. An excellent chronological chart as well as a table of archaeological periods is followed by extremely useful biblical, historical and geographical indices. A four page « Addenda » of the latest bibliography, with page reference to the text, is characteristic of that lively concern for all relevant data which was a hallmark of Fr. De Vaux's scholarship. A few typographical slips, on pp. 51, 252, 273(2), 343, 345, 347 and 379, can be easily corrected. For the benefit of a wider readership this book should be translated as soon as possible into other modern languages.

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