BLACKS AND JEWS IN HISTORIC INTERACTION:
THE BIBLICAL-AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

By

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As an historian, I find myself in a quandary. I have been asked to discuss the biblical-African experience at a colloquium on Black-Jewish relations as though it had some meaning for the contemporary issues that have brought us together. Such meaning, however, is not easily discerned in the historical record. There were, to be sure, connections and interrelationships between the Israelites and Africa. (Abraham sojourned in Egypt; Joseph ruled in Egypt; the Israelites wandered about in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years under the leadership of Moses who had, according to biblical tradition, been reared and nurtured in Egypt, and who gave the people the Tablets of the Law on Sinai's mount. And then there was Solomon's marriage to an Egyptian princess along with his acquiescence in building a throne for Egyptian deities, and his lavish hospitality to the Queen of Sheba. There were also efforts to align with Egypt against the Babylonian menace. But how much vital meaning can be drained from such bare bones without recourse to homiletical ingenuity?

The biblical-African experience thus does not lend itself to a facile transfer from the ancient Near East and Northern Africa, to a contemporary forum of Blacks and Jews. The chasm is far too wide to be bridged by a few biblical mementos, because it is not a chasm carved out by time but a chasm carved out by structure. The biblical experience was within the parameters of a pre-industrial society while our contemporary experiences as Jews and Blacks are taking place within the world's first post-industrial society — a society grappling not only with the problems of a novel stage of economic, social, political and human development, but with all those stark, unresolved problems of the age of imperialism: economic under-development, political turmoil, and ravished identities.

My quandary as an historian is thus clear. Is there some way of filtering out the biblical experience elements which are neither time-bound nor structure-bound or is this possible only by manipulative distortion of the extant sources? It was only after I had mulled over this question for many hours that I discerned that there might indeed be a way. If one focused on the biblical experience as a sequence of effective problem-solving systems, then one might indeed elicit sane principles which are as applicable in a post-industrial society as they were in the pre-industrial society of biblical days.

II

The Bible is no simple record, because Israel's history was no simple history. The Bible is a vast repository of highly contradictory, highly conflictive, and highly confusing materials, since it is the distillation of Israel's extremely complex interaction with the civilizations of -the ancient Near East. This interaction, complex enough in its own right, was further compounded by the major structural transformations which radically altered^ what Israel herself was at any given moment. The Patriarchs interacted with the civilizations and cultures of their day as tribal chieftains sojourning in the land of Canaan, while centuries later their descendants were desperately striving to maintain their territorial independence in the face of massive imperial onslaughts. No less stark is the contrast between

the Israelites *who* wandered in the wilderness and the Israelites who reconsti-
tuted a community in Judea after years of exile and under the auspices of the
Persian emperors. Little wonder, than, that experiences so varied and so
complex yielded a cornucopia of diverse and frequently incompatible law, lore,
and dicta — all equally bearing a biblical imprimatur.

How, then, is one to thread his way through this maze and, without
distinction, come up with the biblical view of anything — much less the
biblical teaching on Black-Jewish relationships? Surely not by citing the
beautiful prophecy attributed to Isaiah:

> "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to
> Assyria, and -the Assyrian will come into Egypt and the
> Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship
> with the Assyrians.
>
> "In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt
> and Assyria a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom
> the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying
>
> Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my
> hands, and Israel my heritage."
>
> Isaiah 19:24-25*

*Cf. also Amos 9:7-8:

> "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me O people
> of Israel?" says the Lord. Did I not bring up
> Israel from the land of Egypt
>
> And the Philistines from Caphtor and "the Syrians
> from Kir?
>
> "Behold the eyes of the Lord God are upon the
> sinful kingdom, And I will destroy it from the ground;
> Except that I will not utterly destroy the
> house of Jacob, says the Lord."

and Deuteronomy 23:7b

> 'You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner
> in his land. The children of the third generation that are born to
> them may enter the assembly of *the* Lord."

but suppressing the violent vision likewise attributed to Isaiah (19:1-10):

> "See how the Lord comes riding swiftly upon a cloud,
>   he shall descend upon Egypt;
>   the idols of Egypt quail before him,
>   Egypt's courage melts within her, I will set
> Egyptian against Egyptian,
>   and -they shall fight one against another,
>   neighbour against neighbour,
>   city against city arid kingdom against kingdom.
> Egypt's spirit shall sink within her,
>   and I will throw her counsels into confusion. They
> may resort to idols and oracle-mongers 5
>   to ghosts and spirits,
>   but I will hand Egypt over to a hard master,
>   and a cruel king shall rule over them. This is the
> very word of the Lord, the Lord of Hosts.
>
> "The waters of the Nile shall drain away,
>   the river shall be parched and run dry;
>   its channels shall stink,
>   the streams of Egypt shall be parched and dry up;
>   reeds and rushes shall wither away;
>   the lotus too beside the Nile
>   and all that is sown along the Mile shall dry up,
>   shall be blown away and vanish. The fishermen shall
> groan and lament,
>   all who cast their hooks into -the Nile
>   and those who spread nets on the water shall
> lose heart. The flax-dressers shall hang
> their heads,
>   the women carding and the weavers shall grow pale,
> Egypt's spinners shall be downcast,
>   and all her artisans sick at heart."

Rather must we look to a method which acknowledges and even points out these contradictions but, at the same time, reveals the operation of principles which not only account for the contradictions but transcend them.

Such a method begins with the assumption that biblical Israel refracts a sequence of structures, each one of which was the outcome of an effective solution to a cluster of problems with which the previous structure was no longer able to cope. The leadership elites in each structure, in turn, grappled with ongoing problems in their own unique way, processing both internal and external stimuli in such a way as to sustain and preserve the integrity of the structure which allocated decision-making powers to them. Thus an identical problem would be resolved quite differently if *the* structure was a semi-nomadic one led by Patriarchs or an agricultural-urban one governed by a coalition of kings, prophets and priests. Yet, insofar as
•the Biblical record is concerned, each structure and each leadership elite is accorded sacred status if they were believed to have functioned in accordance with Yahweh's will. Such a benchmark accounts for the equanimity with which the Bible juxtaposes incompatible structures and mutually exclusive leadership elites, most blatantly in the account of the wilderness wanderings

recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

As an historian, therefore, one roust first unravel tine structures, align the structures with the appropriate decision-making elites, and then interconnect the structures in a sequence from the earliest structure which functioned during the Patriarchal Age to the final structure which functioned under the Aaronide priests sometime after 445 or so B.C.E. Having separated - the structures and having interlinked them sequentially, he is in a position to determine the internal and external problems that each of these structures and their leadership elites faced; the manner in which these problems were grappled; the degree of success or failure that followed on their problem-solving efforts; and the alternative solutions that were offered by -those who were dissatisfied in one way or another with the leadership elites and their mode of resolving the vital issues confronting the people.

Such a method yields the following structures in the order of their appearance and the leadership elites which were conjoined with them:

1. Semi-nomadic /Patriarchs / hereditary principle

2. Wilderness-nomadic / Charismatic / selective principle

3. Transitional (semi-nomadic to agricultural-urban / charismatic / selective

4. Agricultural-urban / Prophetic (Samuel) / selective

5. Agricultural-urban / Monarchical / Prophetic / Priestly hereditary / selective / hereditary

6. Agricultural-urban / Divided Kingdom / Monarchical-Priestly/ polytheistic / Prophetic-Priestly

7. Agricultural-urban / Divided Kingdom / Imperial challenge / Monarchical / Prophetic / Priestly / independent Prophetic polytheistic / Priestly-Prophetic

6. Agricultural-urban Exilic-post exilic till 445 B.C.E.

   Monarchical / Prophetic / Priestly / independent Prophetic dissolution of polytheistic prophetic-priestly

9. Agricultural-urban Post exilic Priestly (Aaronide) Pentateuch dissolution of monarchical, priestly Levitical, prophetic

A glance at this table will quickly convey the point that I am making: the resolution of any problem during the biblical period depended on the way in which the leadership elites evaluated it as affecting the structure which sustained them, and the way in which other elements in the population reacted to -*the* policies advocated by the decision-makers. Some concrete illustrations will confirm the truth of this generalization.

Problem: The Phillistines are threatening Israelite territory at a time when the prevailing structure is agricultural-urban and when the decisive leadership figure is a prophet, Samuel, selected by Yahweh to function^ as His spokesman. Samuel, however, lacks military know-how; the Ark as a military weapon has failed; -the enemy is pressing. Solution: select a military leader, crown him king, but retain ultimate authority as Yahweh's spokesman should the newly crowned king seek to extend his power beyond the military sphere. Samuel selects Saul to be king and the people approve. Snag: _Saul makes several policy decisions without Samuel's approval; e.g., he sacrifices an offering on his own authority when Samuel is delayed, and he decides to spare the King of Aralekites along with the women, children, and booty. Resolution: Samuel turns against Saul, anoints a rival king, David, with the hope that Saul's example will keep David in line. This hope was, by and large, fulfilled, since David was careful to remain on excellent terms with Samuel's successor, Nathan. Indeed the latter succeeded in having Solomon rather than Adonijah declared king. Snag: Solomon pressed for royal absolutism by ignoring the prophets, elevating the priests, and sanctioning polytheistic shrines. Reaction: Prophets split the kingdom by supporting Jeroboam against Solomon's son, Reheboam. Consequences: an ongoing leadership crisis as kings, prophets, priests, and polytheistic spokesmen jockeyed for power — a leadership crisis which was not resolved until the promulgation of •the Pentateuch around 445 B.C.E. and the take-over by the Aaronide priests.

This schema clearly reveals that the same kind of problem, namely, given the need for military-political leadership, how much power and authority should the king exercise vis-a-vis the prophets who laid claim to ultimate authority by virtue of their direct access to Yahweh? To reconfirm publicly this absolute claim, Samuel himself slew the king of the Amalekites and ordered the people to massacre the women, children, and cattle. To erode this claim, Solomon not only built a magnificent Temple to center attention on the priesthood but allowed polytheistic shrines to be built in Jerusalem. Indeed, the kings of the North again and again lent support to the prophets and priests of baal to undermine prophetic authority, while the kings of the south vacillated between working out a modus vivendi with the prophets and priests and giving sanction to polytheistic shrines.

Let us now consider another illustration. Problem: the Babylonians are threatening the Kingdom of Judah, what policies should be advocated. The structure is agricultural-urban; the leadership elites ace at this time a coalition of the king, prophets, and priests. How is independence to be maintained and the coalition sustain itself in power.

Proposed solution: Seek an alliance with Egypt and break with Babylonia. Such a policy was encouraged by the fact that Josiah's reformation had aligned the monarchy with Yahwist prophets and Yahwist priests against polytheism and had trumpeted the Temple in Jerusalem as Yahweh's divinely appointed residence.

Snag: Prophets, such as Jeremiah, would not go along with the

coalition. He denounced any alliance with Egypt; advocated submission to Babylonia; and prophesied that if he was not heeded, Yahweh would have no compunction about destroying His house in Jerusalem. Since the coalitions spoke in Yahweh's name and Jeremiah spoke in Yahweh's name, how were the people to decide between them.

Resolution: Since effective decision-making was in the hands of the coalition, the Babylonians were resisted, the land was overrun, .the Temple destroyed, and a goodly segment, of the population was taken into exile.

Here again we see that the evaluation of. Egypt vis-a-vis Babylonia was dependent on the way in which the leadership elites calculated their chances for preserving their independence and the continuity of their leadership roles, and on the way in which other prestigious leaders reacted to the coalition in power and the wisdom of their decisions.

Now let us consider a somewhat different set of examples:

Problem: How can Israel and Judah preserve their independence in the face of imperial powers on tine magnitude of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia.

Projected solution: Fight back, since Yahweh will not abandon His people.

Outcome: Israel overwhelmed in 721 by the Assyrians; its capital Samaria is laid waste; the people are taken off into exile, scattered, and to all intents and purposes are lost.

Judah overrun by Babylonians, Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple burnt, and many carried off to Babylonia.

Evaluation: The projected solution was a failure because it was impossible for such miniscule nations to retain independence in the face of coercive power of such magnitude.

Alternative solution: Abandon illusion that independence is possible and seek out a modus vivendi with the imperial power which will preserve autonomy but forego coercive sovereignty.

Prerequisites for a solution:

(1) Imperial policies favoring autonomy without coercive sovereignty as an effective mode of governing a wide-spread empire.

(2) Dissolution of leadership elites with a vital stake in preserving some degree of coercive sovereignty, in this instance primarily kingship.

(3) Dissolution of leadership elites with shifting goals and objects, in this instance prophecy.

(4) Centralization of autoncroous power in elites who have little or

nothing to gain from coercive sovereignty, but .who are likely to flourish in a framework of religious and cultural autonomy, in this instance priesthood.

Realization:
  (1) Persian imperial policy favored priestly systems enjoying religious and cultural autonomy, but deprived of coercive sovereignty.

       (2) A priestly class, -the Aaronides, willing to collaborate with Persian emperors in setting up a system of priestly absolutism with a concomitant phasing out of kingship and prophecy.

       (3) The promulgation of the Pentateuch which accorded this priestly class absolute authority over an unmutable Law which could be challenged only on pain of death.

       (4) This take-over was justified on -*the* grounds that it was simply a restoration of the system that had operated in the wilderness with the full blessing of Yahweh and Moses.

       (5) God's singular sovereignty was reaffirmed; His Selection of Israel was reproclaimed; but the reconstituted conrouni-ty did not need coercive sovereignty to function as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Evaluation:

       The priestly solution proved to be an optimal one. The Aaronide priests exercised hegemony for more than two hundred years with only one major challenge, the Samaritan schism, which *was* resolved without civil war when the schismatics took off to Samaria and built -their own temple there. They successfully maintained their religious and cultural autonomy under the Persians, under Alexander the Great, under the Ptolemies, and under Antiochus III. During their ascendancy, there was both economic prosperity and spiritual and cultural creativity; This was the age in which most of the Psalms were composed: the book of Job written; and -the pursuit of Wisdom encouraged. It was also under the aegis of the Aaronides that the Jewish community in Alexandria worked out an impressive fusion of the teachings of the Pentateuch with ripe fruits of Hellenistic civilization. To be stressed above all is that the lack of coercive sovereignty in no way affected the highly differentiated life style, belief system, and corpus of Law which were rooted in the Pentateuch and not in Persian life styles, belief systems, or legislation.

       If, then, it is evident that problems and projected solutions were dependent on the particular and its particular structure and the decision making elite or elites, in what sense can we speak of a single people Israel at all? The answer to this question is to be found in the paradoxical fact that each successive structure and each successive elite persisted in seeing the problem as a problem for the same deity, Yahweh. With the exception of those kings who toyed with a polytheistic alternative, both the decision-making elites and those challenging them insisted that they were carrying out Yahweh's mandate. However mutually exclusive the assessment of the problem and the projected resolution, it was attached to the God of the Patriarchs. The self-same *God* validated all structures, all elites, all dissidents. And

nowhere is this paradoxical validation more pronounced than in the book which became the revelation nonpareil, the Pentateuch. The thread that binds Israel's history is the thread of unity heeding not only divinity, but contraries and incompatibles.

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legitimate institution in the Pentateuch, and even in the Mishnah and Talmud, although the utilization of Jewish slaves seems to have been phased out during the period of Aaronide hegemony. At no time, it should be stressed, did color or race play any role.

As for social justice towering above institutionalized religious forms, the subsequent history of Judaism and Christianity reveals that such a hierarchy of religious values has never gotten very far.

Outcome: This spiritual surplus -throughout the ages proved to be a wellspring of discontent, stirring reformers and revolutionists to criticize and to challenge established institutions of their callousness, their disregard for the plight of the masses, and their manipulation of sacred symbols and noble visions.

Perhaps the most vivid example of spiritual surplus is the first chapter of Genesis. Here, at the very beginning of the saga of Israel's odyssey is a proclamation that the one and only God created heaven and earth and not simply the land of Canaan. And He capped His creative activity with a single individual — male and female. He created them — shaped in His own image. An individual — not white, not black, not Jewish, not Christian, not pagan, not even exclusively man — "male and female He created them," and this single individual was charged with the care of God's creation.

This spiritual surplus indeed. That God was one, the universe one, and the individual person one — with all the implications rooted in these notions — was not translatable into the real world of the ancient Near East any more than it was to be translatable in any of the real ' worlds that were to follow. Yet these notions are there, as a spiritual surplus which neither Jew nor Christian could ever totally suppress;, however inoperable these notions proved to be. Standing pivotally at the very beginning of the Pentateuch, these teachings cannot be bypassed — every Jew and Christian must read this chapter before he gets to Abraham, Moses, the people of Israel or the promised land.

The biblical record is thus clear: Although Israel's history reveals itself to have been a sequence of differentiated structures, and succession of leadership elites grappling with the problems of survival in very different ways, it nonetheless created spiritual surpluses which became a repository of transcendental values.

Among these values, three stand out for us:

(1) Peace and harmony among nations;

(2) Economic equity and social justice,

(3) The precious worth of each individual man, woman, white, black, yellow, Jew, Christian, Buddhist, pagan.

IV

 Does the biblical experience have any carry-over for this conference of
 Blacks and Jews? I would suggest that it has carry-over in two spheres.

     Firstly, it compels us to focus on structures and leadership elites;
for, no less than in biblical days, operational decisions are likely to follow
from the perception of how concrete objectives can be most expeditiously
attained, and not elevated principles or noble words. And when we turn to the
Black and Jewish worlds, we are struck by the fact that neither world displays a
monolithic leadership or a monolithic leadership elite. There are a bewildering
array of structures and a bewildering array of leadership elites, since Blacks
and Jews are spread widely throughout the world, are structured within highly
contrasting economic, social and political systems, systems which themselves are
situated on very different levels of the spiral of development; and are exposed
to varying pressures of the winds of change. Black interests, no more than
Jewish interests," can escape the highly specific way in which problems are
posed to them, depending on where they are and what they are and why they are.
If, then, the biblical experience be paradigmatic, then leadership elites
whether Black or Jewish will follow through on the objectives and goals which
are dictated by the specific setting and by the perception of how within this
setting such objectives and goals can be attained. Israelis defend their
borders with arms, they counter terror with terror; -they cling to their
nationalism, lest a premature altruism leave them homeless and corrode their
impressive achievements. Blacks, in turn, are not likely to remain passive in
Rhodesia or Mozambique or South Africa — or for that matter anywhere in the
world — so long as -they see themselves barred from attaining those objectives
which they visualize as both legitimate and attainable. The fact that such
commitments frequently pit black against white, black against black, Jew against
Arab, Jew against Jew, and nation against nation is as yet still as much a fact
of life as it was when the Israelites conquered Canaan, fought off the
Philistines, rose in revolt against the house of David, and strove to maintain
their independence in •the face of Assyrian and Babylonian onslaughts. That
these facts of life have tragic consequences is perhaps nowhere more vividly
evident than in the bitter struggle of Israel — one of the first fruits of
national liberation from British imperialism — with liberated Egypt, Syria, and
Iraq. Instead of a joint venture against the common foe, underdevelopment, a
series of bloody confrontations.

     But there is another carry-over from the biblical experience and that
is the spiritual surplus of transcendent values which, as we have seen, were
somehow pressed out of the facts of life. What bearing, if any, have these values
for our contemporary situation?

     You will recall that the spiritual surplus was that repository of
biblical values which proved to be inoperable at the time and which have been
inoperable since. These values were three:

1. Peace among nations.

2. Economic equity and social justice.

3. The unique worth of the individual person.

The historical record is hardly ambiguous with respect to the "transcendental' quality of these values, even as the contemporary world seems dedicated to keeping these values out of this world. Yet there is a qualitative difference that may yet transfer these values from the "impossible" to the "necessary," from the spiritual to the operational. What are these qualitative differences?

Firstly, the emergence of the European Common Market has demonstrated that economic pooling and sharing can dissolve nation-state rivalry and nation-state hostility without -the loss of national and cultural autonomy. France and Germany, it now seems clear, will not wage war against each other again. It should also be noted that the two states which have forsworn their sovereign right to have nuclear weapons, namely Germany and Japan, have enjoyed an economic growth far beyond that enjoyed by Great Britain who built a nuclear arsenal and who refused to join the Common Market when it was launched.

Secondly, the prodigious growth of the world economy; the emergence of the United States as the first post-industrial society in the history of the world; the breakthrough of new technologies, raising industrial and agricultural productivity dramatically; the spread of trans-national economic systems; the rapid development of communication, weather and earth resources satellites; the proved ability to solve managerial scientific and technological problems of extraordinary complexity as demonstrated by NASA; the spread of higher education among the middle and lower classes — all these happenings prove conclusively that the impossible of yesterday is the operational of tomorrow. Economic equity and social justice are now expectations, not prophetic whimsies.

Thirdly, the potential mastery of economic scarcity holds forth the realistic hope that a day will come when each individual person will be regarded as both unique and worthy. Such persons are already bursting out of the womb of affluence, persons who see others as persons, not pigments, not aliens, not category this or stereotype that, but as persons.

Could it be that this Conference of Jews and Blacks will recognize that in our day the spiritual surplus of biblical Israel, stored for centuries high above this world because there was nowhere else to preserve it, is now the major resource if there is to be any this-world at all. At a time when tools exist for spreading peace and harmony among nations, economic well-being and social justice among the wretched of the earth, and the gospel of the unique and worthy individual among the whites, -the blacks, the yellows, and all those beautiful shadings in between — and among men and women and children — and among Americans, Japanese, Israelites, Tanzanians, Egyptians, and Syrians — and among Jews and Christians and Moslems and Buddhists and Hindus, can we Blacks and Jews fail to find them — and use them.