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Overcoming Tribal Violence: A Challenge for Contemporary Christianity

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From a selected survey of some recent scientific findings from archaeology and ancient history, the paper draws two main conclusions. First, we who now know enough to follow the Bible story back from Roman Palestine into prehistory can see humanity's most obvious and tragic fault: tribal violence. Second, studying the Old Testament from this (new) perspective provides a lens to see inside one particular tribe how each tribe's hand has always turned against its neighbours. Against this background, the New Testament prophetically projects the only remedy – the Gospel of Jesus - and presents a challenge to contemporary Christianity to find non-violent ways to meet the future.

Introduction

Today, we know more about our ancestry than we ever thought it would be possible to know. We can even visualise it. Computer graphics, created against a background of real deserts and real forests, make ancient humankind real. Archaeological discoveries continue to illuminate our understanding and appreciation of ancient cultures. For example, clay tablets and potsherds and the multi-layered ruins of Jericho have been illuminating a familiar story for a hundred and fifty years, and they continue to do so. Kenneth Kitchen, the British Egyptologist, first wrote an account of it in 1966, and expanded it into a volume nearly two inches thick (see Kitchen, 2003).

It is no surprise that, the farther they go back in time, biblical accounts become more difficult to link to verifiable events, and the deeper into the ground the search has to go. So Kitchen wrote the story backwards, the logical direction to go—the story is richer if it starts with the recent past. Evidence of the occupation by the Romans and, before them, the Greeks, is fairly plentiful. But the information becomes scarce by 1000 BCE, about the time when David and Solomon were expanding tiny Israel into an empire. The habit of scavenging building materials from the ruins of earlier occupations means that the foundations are almost the only parts of the older houses still in place under the rubble. There are also the tombs, and, scattered around, pieces of pottery and coins and beads and, very occasionally, inscriptions.

Direct evidence sometimes can be backed up with records left by the neighbours. Well-known examples (see Kitchen, 2003, chap. 2) are the kings named in Assyrian and Babylonian clay tablets between 745 and 560 BCE: Ahab, Jehu, Jehoash, Menahem, Pekah and Hoshea (kings of Israel or Samaria) and Hezekiah, Manasseh, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah (kings of Judah). Radiocarbon dating to verify the time period of a biblical event is rarely called upon, because it is not usually accurate enough to remove the uncertainties. Hezekiah's tunnel, however, is one outstanding exception, made with the use of very recent technology (Frumkin, Shimron, & Rosenbaum, 2003). These researchers use accelerator mass spectrometry to date minute plant fragments in the original plaster and thorium isotope ratios to date a stalactite. Radiocarbon dates recently have become much more reliable by using a method for finding an elapsed

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time from a Geiger counter measurement by "calibrating" it with samples of known age. However, in the time period considered, the calibrated ages are themselves subject to large uncertainties. The great engineering feat of the tunnel, as mentioned in 2 Kings 20 and 2 Chronicles 32, as well as the inscription beside the pool, is attributed to Hezekiah (727-698 BCE), but the date of its construction and the inscription have been disputed by scholars who contend that they are works perhaps as late as the 2nd century BCE. The tunnel, which winds through the rock to bring water from the reliable Gihon spring outside the city wall to the Siloam pool inside, is now dated at between 800 and 510 BCE.

Judges, Patriarchs and Kings

No clear reference to David in documents contemporary to him and outside Israel has ever been found, and there are varying scholarly views about Ancient Israel and its kings (eg., Finkelstein & Silberman, 2001, 2006). There appear to be some references, however, written from the generations after him. Kitchen (2003) lists three fairly difficult-to-read inscriptions, two of which mention the "house of Dwd." It should be noted here that there is ongoing debate as to how this phrase should be interpreted (see Dever, 2001), but the general consensus of scholars in the field is to accept "house of David." There are other indicators of the drama of his life. For example, the recently discovered "Goliath inscription" (see Bar-Ilan University Website) was found at Tell es-Safi, thought to be on the site of Gath, the major Philistine town mentioned in the books of Samuel and Chronicles. The date of David's kingdom is still contested, as well as the location and size of the palace on the heights of Jerusalem. Historians hope that excavations, notoriously difficult to undertake, will reveal more information about his kingdom, his capital, and his administration. Archaeologists working on a current project in Jerusalem, under the direction of Eilat Mazar, an Israeli archaeologist, uncovered in 2005 the (poorly preserved) remains of a large building, which, they suggest, could be a palace built by David (see Mazar, 2007). The team has collected pottery samples at the site for dating, but their interpretations are controversial. They have also submitted samples for radiocarbon dating, which has not been carried out previously in Jerusalem, probably because archaeologists never previously considered it accurate enough (see Lawler, 2007).

It is not only early Israelite data that are scarce, as little data survive from any early civilization. Clay tablets do not survive floods or fires or earthquakes very well, and early town-dwellers made few inscriptions and struck few coins. The few peoples about whom we have reliable information include peoples who are known to almost everybody (e.g., the Trojans and the pyramid-builders of Egypt), and some almost unknown (e.g., the ancient farmers of New Guinea, who built the great irrigation works of that country's central highlands). One group whose achievements are well known is the Sanskrit-speakers of Southern Asia, from whom – it seems – come most of the Indo-Aryan languages, a branch of Indo-European languages to which English and most other European languages belong.

The chronology of these early civilizations sits conformably beside those that achaeologists attach to the history of Israel, as recorded in the Old Testament. The layers from Solomon's time yield pottery - though there is currently some controversy about the exact date of the pottery pieces supposedly from the time of Solomon and preserved in Jerusalem - and some artifacts of iron. The Iron Age, usually considered to date from about 1200 BCE, is attested to in the Bible by a description of the Philistines' exploitation of their iron monopoly, and by Goliath's iron spearhead which, before iron became common, may have been imported from Crete. Iron weapons gave their owners the great advantage of strength and the ability to hold a sharp edge, but it was difficult to smelt and, therefore, expensive. The Bible records that Solomon had many chariots—see 1 Kings 4:26—so, obviously, he could afford it.

Their efforts go deeper, however, to the time before Judges and the Patriarchs. Levels in Palestine continue to be found beneath those from 1000 BCE, and they give evidence of bronze weapons and implements. Prior to this time, bronze gives way to stone (Paleolithic and Neolithic times). Nevertheless, there seems to be very little to gather from Israel, and its early history must come almost exclusively from the Bible. This is a convenient place to start, of course, since some scholars (e.g., Soggin, 1989) believe that the account of David's succession to the throne is "one of the earliest history writings in the world, if not the earliest" (p. 216).

Very little independent evidence can be found of the times when Israel was ruled by the heads of clans (judges) and beyond. The Bible places Israel in the middle of the Canaanites, small kingdoms almost continually in conflict with their neighbours, fighting for the best land in a country where drought and famine determined how many people would permanently survive. Like much of the Middle East, it was probably already deforested when the children of Israel settled there.

Historical investigation shows that Israel's situation in Palestine was as the Bible repeatedly portrays it, an unstable coalition of tribes never far from insurrection, and - to the anger of the prophets - repeatedly imitating their neighbours. The picture is painted vividly in the fierce Song of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5), believed to be one of the oldest pieces of text in the whole Hebrew Bible.

Worlds within the World

Of course, the Middle East is not the only place where ancient civilizations developed. The Incas and the Aztecs developed in the Americas, but much later than the period when the stories of Saul and Samuel were being enacted. On the other hand, the Mayan civilization began its rise to power in what is now Southern Mexico, as long ago as 2600 BCE, before the times of the biblical patriarchs. It held power for almost 3000 years, and was as astonishing a development as Egypt had been just a few hundred years earlier. Egypt, where the Nile enriched the soil annually, and allowed the pharaohs to govern populations in the millions, has left its amazing monuments and cities to show what its river allowed it to achieve. It did so because Egypt imported the food plants that had been bred in Mesopotamia, the place where the earliest evidence of settled, village life, has been found.

People in Europe also followed the lead of the Mesopotamians. The famous "Ice man" (Fowler, 2001, pp. 105–106), found in September 1991 in the high mountains between Italy and Austria, was civilized. Radiocarbon dating of some of his tissue gave a result of approximately 3300 BCE. At this time, ancient Greece still had 2000 years to reach its zenith, and Egypt, before the "Old Kingdom" and the first pyramids, was just starting to use stone in building. His last meal consisted mainly of coarse bread made from domesticated einkorn wheat, which is not native to Europe. There were also spikelets of the same low protein grass in his clothes. This and other evidence suggests that this 5300-year old man had been in a fairly warm-climate farming valley on the day that he climbed the mountains and died. He came from an early European civilization that was still not very advanced (Chalcolithic or Copper-age Europeans).

Was this the first time that the seeds of wild plants were collected and grown sufficiently enough to feed these people from one season to another? It appears that, because the climate had warmed up after the big freeze, farming settlements - invented for the first time - were appearing all around the world, roughly just over ten thousand years ago. There was also the mutated form of primitive wheat that kept its grains in the ear instead of scattering them. Archaeologists can still recognise this feature in the charred heads of wheat found in the debris around houses and can consequently chart the spread of this early domesticated plant (polyploid) variety.

One of the earliest examples so far discovered is Bab edh-Dhra, a small town currently being excavated in the Jordan Valley near the Dead Sea and dated at

11,500 years Before Present (cal. BP). The mud-brick and stone dwellings are more elaborate than those usually occupied by tribes moving seasonally and, critically, the excavators found the foundations of two oval-shaped mud-brick silos where grain had been stored (with notched stones to support floor joists to keep the grain above ground level, dry and safe from pests).

What surprises many people is just how narrow is the band of time into which mankind's civilised ancestors actually fit. There are numerous caves, middens, and rock shelters across the world where ancient humans left their traces, but settled existence is recent. A current review of the more reliable datings now available for occupation sites in the Americas, the Middle East, and elsewhere, suggests that agriculture took a little longer to develop than archaeologists had thought, but it nevertheless fits within thousands, not tens of thousands of years (see Balter, 2007, pp. 1830-1835).

From the evidence, it appears that these ancestors left their traces infrequently, but in Mesopotamia they did so early enough and often enough for present humanity to recognise it as the cradle of Western civilization. As far as it is known, this is where people first gave up rock shelters and gradually stopped scavenging, only possible when they had crops with harvestable fruits or seeds that could be stored between growing seasons. After a time, farming allowed humans to reduce the amount of time they spent foraging and, ultimately, to live completely off their harvests. The accompanying spurt in the population was so great that the resources of water, land, and forest, were quickly threatened. The deforestation in Palestine is characteristic of the whole of the Middle East. In parts of the Fertile Crescent, settlers had to abandon their settlements and move to new places after only about a thousand years of farming. There were too many people for a limited area of land.

By the time of Christ, alongside civilizations great and small, foragers were still to be found across the world, with examples across Europe and Scandinavia, North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia (less well-known examples are the fish farms developed in southern Australia and the highly developed irrigated agriculture of the New Guinea highlands). Today, hardly any remain.

Information about the first farmers is growing steadily, people who lived close to Palestine before the rise of the first kingdoms, and long before the great ancient civilizations. Few people can be unaware of at least some of the discoveries, especially those presented in television documentaries. One of the more able popularisers is Jared Diamond, who searched to find out how humanity came to be so prodigal. Poring over the disintegration of environments like those in the Euphrates valley and the more recent disasters of Easter Island and Greenland, he wove the threads together to show how the pattern repeats itself, that is, tribes learn how to grow food, they prosper, their needs outstrip their resources, and they fight. Though not uncontested, his explanation of how the boon of human progress has also been its doom caught the thinking world's attention. The celebrity and awards conferred on him have allowed him to work full time on what, for him, gives these discoveries their real importance—the chance that humanity might learn the lesson in time to save the planet (Diamond, 1997, p. 199).

The "Worst Mistake" in Human History

As a teenager, Diamond visited the state of Montana in the United States of America, and was imprinted with the "big sky." Returning now is painful to him because of the violence wreaked on nature by toxic mine wastes, fertilizer runoff, herbicides, and clear felling of timber. But far worse pain is felt when the violence done by humans is done, indiscriminately, on other humans. Diamond points to the inequality, warfare, and disease, that quickly followed mankind's transition to settled life, claiming it to be the worst mistake in the history of the human race. There is some justification for

this surprising denunciation. Wherever the "tranquil" farming enterprise was taken up, mankind multiplied. The resources of land and lake and forest were exploited and, quickly, they were exhausted. Then, when his children cried for food, he fought his neighbours, the ones who had poured in to share the bounty (Diamond, 1987).

The story of humanity before the time of David and Solomon is becoming fairly clear and it is attracting major attention. Its significance for the environment and world peace is of particular relevance for contemporary societies, national/world leadership, and for Christians in general. For Christians, it opens a window on the violence of their past that might motivate them to confront the violence of the present. It hardly needs to be argued that it motivated Jesus. As he was passing through Jericho, almost as old as Bab edh-Dhra and not far away, his reaction to the suffering of the victim, a commonplace in Roman Palestine, was exactly what people who knew him would have expected: Victims were to be cared for immediately, wherever and whatever the circumstances.

Caring for victims, however, is not sufficient. The problem of violence and victimisation has to be tackled in the human heart, where it begins. It was the attitude of Jesus of Nazareth to the violent that distinguishes him from other idealists, perhaps best summed up as: "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you." Christians, historically, have found this attitude difficult to accept. While some Christians have always cared for victims, other Christians have mounted crusades against Mohammed, waged "just and holy wars," and done violence to neighbour tribes or countries in competition with them for their scarce resources. If these actions and attitudes were not so anti-Christian, denunciations would never be made, and books like *The God Delusion* (Dawkins, 2006) would not sell.

Recent events in places where Seventh-day Adventists have enjoyed great success show that Christianity, as received, has not prevented all of them from perpetuating violence. This may be unthinkable for many who read this paper. Christians in Australia and similar countries are indeed fortunate, equipped with food, warmth and security that are never in doubt. But they have never walked in, say, Rwandan shoes, in desperate need of an inherited land, disputed by the starving members of their own families. Loving an enemy may not be all that significant when one's family, relatives, and friends are starving to death. Diamond's account of how environmental destruction initiates human anger is not just history: It is prophecy. Violence, he argues, follows the loss of resources (Diamond, 2005).

A recent report (de Soysa & Gleditsch, 1999) estimates that some sixty percent of the conflicts of the (then) past fifteen years resulted from shortages of land and resources, impacting the availability of livelihood and food. Little has changed in the past decade, though the increasing scarcity of safe drinking water has made it a far more precious commodity than it has ever been before. Christians urgently need to plan for the part they might play in a world soon to be desperately short of resources. If Diamond is even partly correct in his ideas, then violence is likely to increase dramatically, as it did in Rwanda and other countries around the world, some close to Australia (e.g., Solomon Islands and Fiji). Christian belief often has failed to prevent armed attempts to overthrow democratic governments. If the message of the "gentle" Jesus is truly the hope of the world, then Christians must find out how to recover this message for contemporary societies. Currently, the message largely has been violated, emasculated, or rendered invisible by the actions of Christian nations and churches.

Conclusion

Christians need to seriously consider Diamond's claims. Though not uncontested, they nevertheless are supported by sufficient evidence to contend that "tribal violence" is an obvious and tragic fault of humanity. Christians now have an opportunity to study the Old Testament from this new perspective, as it provides a lens to see inside one

particular tribe how every tribe's hand has always turned against its neighbours. And against this background, the New Testament prophetically projects the only remedy, the message (gospel) of Jesus Christ.

Christians in developed countries are not free to denounce the warlike inhabitants of underdeveloped nations until they themselves have turned away from the attitude and actions of violence. Many Christians seem now to condone armed conflict, perhaps because they live securely beyond the threat of war and have never experienced real violence. They will be unprepared for the turmoil that now seems ever more likely.

The challenge for contemporary Christianity is to find non-violent ways to meet the future. What will Christians do, especially Christians with footholds in the cultures and countries where resources inevitably will deplete first and conflict therefore will first erupt? What will they do when the children cry for food? Will the gospel of peace and forgiveness have been injected into their message with enough urgency and efficacy for Christianity to reach its true goal and actually prevent violence of "tribe against tribe," and more particularly so, when both tribes are Christian? Will Christians now, before the cataclysm, scan the future and plan how to meet it in the spirit of Jesus?

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