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The "unity" of Israel and Judah

Religious and even civil unity is such an obviously desirable thing for our modern world that it risks becoming a slogan – like patriotism or mother-love to force people into conformity with policies harmful to greater values. "The devil can cite Scripture for his purposes," and the proponents of unity-at-all-costs can allege that the whole Old Testament is a moan over the tragic loss of a unity which the Chosen People once perfectly possessed, and which God's leadership constantly pushed them to reacquire. The real facts seem to have been quite different, according to this provocative reassembling of them.

"Die Einheit von Israel und Juda: Nachdenkliches zum Wort 'Einheit'," *Una Sancta* 26 (1971) 154-164.

Germans today sigh for the unity of their fatherland, and all men sigh for the unity of the world and of the churches. But splits are a reality that men have just had to learn to live with. Even the New Testament hints this. But the Old Testament in its entirety is the record of a twelve-tribe unity quickly broken into two irreparably divided realms.

The historical facts

A thousand years before Christ, nomadic tribes from outside began to settle in the hills west of Jordan. Growing gradually into a confederation, they followed their nomadic thought-patterns in regarding themselves as twelve blood-brothers from a single father Israel (originally named Jacob), with remoter relationships to East-Jordan tribes like the Edomites. More importantly, all the tribes recognized themselves as worshipers of a single God, the one who had brought some of their clans out of an oppressive situation in Egypt. This God Yahweh was doubtless seen as identical with the local creator-God El.

The unity of all these Jacob-tribes was rather loose: occasional encounter at one of the several pilgrimage-centers; mutual defense under some charismatic hero-figure when attacked. Only when another population also began immigrating, the Philistines, a more enduring conflict began which was at first to Israel's disadvantage. In reaction to this, they adopted the tighter political organization of kingship. Even this did not meet the need at first, under Saul of the north (Benjamin); but with David of the south (Judah) comes a powerful empire, with Jerusalem as a newly-seized political and cultic center of unity.

Solomon threatened this unity by building up Judah at the expense of heavy exactions of money and man-

power from the North. Solomon's successor in Judah is confronted with a demand for economic reforms before the North will acknowledge him; he refuses, and the great split is a reality about 922 B.C. To make Yahweh-worship available within the North, its new king Jeroboam sets up shrines with cult-symbols not unlike the bull-bodied figures prominent also in the Jerusalem cultus.

After recriminations and skirmishes, a cool coexistence ensues, and develops even into dynastic intermarriage. After two hundred years of this, in 722 the northern realm is overrun by Assyria; a large part of its population is deported and loses all sense of national unity. Imported settlers and new administrative units are imposed on Samaria by the Assyrians. Another hundred years pass, Assyria declines, and now it is Babylon which twice overruns Judah, in 598 and 587. But no new regime or population is imposed there; and the many deportees remain united inside Babylon. Thus when Cyrus in 539 permitted their return, there was a many-sided basis for a hostility between Judah and Samaria which became definitive. It is not clear exactly how much of this was due to the Kings-era split, which is the problem we are focusing here.

How Israel took it

It comes as a shock to realize, when once we think about it, that the Chosen People was able to live barely a hundred of its thousands of years in the visible institutional unity of all its twelve tribes. We incline to read back into the breakdown of that unity all the emotions which for us cluster around the divisions torturing the world today, divisions among Christians and within nations. But we must dispassionately ask ourselves: Did the Israelites of old really feel that way about it? Did it come as a shock to *them* to realize that their unity had been broken up practically overnight? And did they then carry forward into action some longing for a unity to be striven for and dreamed of and concretely effected anew? And even if so, was this desired unity perceived as a postulate of their faith; was it longed after as God's deed for his people? In other words, was the reunification of Israel with Judah ever given a theological and religious motivation?

Hints of unity

In fact, already in David's time there seems to have been an awareness that larger world unities were more worth striving after – and equally remote of attainment. Thus in the Yahwist strand of the Pentateuch, which took form in Solomon's court, the tower of Babel is introduced with the nostalgic remembrance (Gen 11:1) "back in the days when the whole world was united by a single language." The disrupted unity which follows is blamed on the thirst for glory and power. This may seem to carry a veiled message that David's own prosperous domain was similarly conceived and could not long endure. Unity is God's work; and when men's manipulations intervene they may create guilt and worse disunity.

Again, the Dinah-story of the J-strand (Gen 34) hints at a different aspect of political unity. Even the heartland of David's realm had included some non-Israelite populations. If there was to be unity, then naturally there would have to be intermarriage; otherwise they were second-class citizens. But marriage with non-Israelites was forbidden by very old laws like Ex 34:16. The Yahwist seems to reckon with a possibility that perhaps such a law ought to be up-dated now that the cultural pre-

suppositions had been changed. Shechem's ruler offered to marry his son with Jacob's daughter, precisely in order that Israel and Canaan might be united into "one people" (Gen 34:16, 22). But what happened next was catastrophic – when men try to produce the unity that ought to be God's work alone.

Unity is God's work

The J-narrative recognizes that there are bound to be minorities and unassimilated groups. If there is to be a unity such as God's will demands, it must be a higher unity which will take these inevitable disunities into account. The Yahwist expresses the manner in which not human might but divine intervention must effect this unity, in the form of progressive expansion of a blessing from God: In Abraham all nations will be blessed (Gen 12:1) and Abraham intercedes for all (Gen 18); Isaac makes peace treaties with neighbor-clans (Gen 26); Joseph saves Gentiles from starvation (Gen 41). These are modest measures indeed: but in the long run more effective than imposing unity by force.

The very splendor of the unity of Solomon's rule, created by David's power, had led the Yawhist writer to a theological reflection on how dangerous it is to leave to human initiatives that broken unity which it was God's business to restore. This combination of piety and skepticism never left in doubt that chosen Israel was after all a unity which God simply had to safeguard.

Yet the Yahwist (c. 950 B.C.) had hardly finished his writing when that unity was shattered; not only the assimilated local tribes tore away, but even the Jacob-clans split in two. What is more, we know nothing from the Yahwist himself or from two centuries after him about any serious hope of restoring the unity. This is found in our sources first in northern Hosea and southern Isaiah, both about 750 B.C.

Hosea, preaching only a few years before the fall of the northern kingdom, had to warn that it was being rejected by Yahweh; and the hope which he holds out is not that of a strong central power-structure as in the height of the Kings era, but that of the more democratic and fragmented Judges period. Isaiah on the contrary (9,6) predicts that even Galilee, which was first to fall to Assyria, would find renewed unity with the Yahwist theocracy, thanks to a Davidic king.

Oracles approving division

Meanwhile such prophetic oracles as we possess from 920 to 820 seem rather to favor the separation of the kingdom (1 Kg 11:29). If the prophets as the conscience of Israel never explicitly opposed the separate existence of the North, this may be because for the man in the street all such questions of politics and empire were really irrelevant, and there was a steady trickle of cultic interaction between the two realms.

Strangely, only with the collapse of the North as a separate political unity in 721, the biblical authors again begin to insist on the hope of its unification with Judah (Jer 3 and 30 after 625). The focus of unity is now not so much the king or Davidic line, but the Temple on Zion. This reflects the Deuteronomic cult-monopoly introduced under Judah's king Josiah (621). The weakness of Assyria enabled Josiah meanwhile to take over Samaria politically. And at that time the first edition of the "Deuteronomistic history" (Jos-Jg-Sm-Kg) could rewrite the events of three centuries to try to show that the defection of the North had been only an

ephemeral sin and punishment.

All this was sheerest wishful thinking. Josiah himself shortly afterward (609) fell victim of Egypt, and Jerusalem was destroyed; much of Judah's population was deported to Babylon, and its political existence ceased (587). The Deuteronomists had to prepare a new edition of their historical work.

Unity loved only when lost

In exile, then, the hope of restoration is emphatically combined with that of reunion with the North in Ezekiel (37:15f), for whom "Israel" always means "including Judah." Here we must face the fact that unity was never so much an ideal as when it was most unrealizable; theologically it was not a program of action, but a symbol for truths of a different order. In some mysterious way Yahweh was expected to intervene in order to restore miraculously the unity of Israel and Judah. But even that unity was the symbol of God's wider plan, an eschatological Utopia.

This "Unity" symbolism has lived on in Jesus' prayer "that all may be one" in John; and in Paul's "gospel breaking down the wall between Jew and Gentile." It lives on today in ecumenism, and in secularized form in the desire of One World.

It is worth our effort to notice realistically what basis in cold historical reality this biblical sigh for unity possessed. The fact is that during the period when action could have been taken to unite Israel and Judah again politically, nobody had a word to say about it. Only when all such possibility was passed, the idea began to look like a romantic dream.

Facing these facts opens out two options before us. Either we ought to demythologize seductive dreams of reunited shattered polities after it is too late. Or we ought to take bold and practical steps toward a new unifying David before all concrete chance of this is past. At any rate we ought to quit sloganizing "Ah! Unity!," and evaluate bluntly what precisely is being offered to us under that name in the various markets. The slogan is an old one. But what we have here shown of its origins is thought-provoking.