On Sociology and the History of Israel

A Reply to Eckhardt Otto - and Some Further Considerations

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In 1981 Eckhardt OTTO published a short article in this journal, evidently in anticipation of a discussion concerning the relevance of sociology for Old Testament studies[1]. His initiative seems not to have provoked many objections, perhaps because OTTO's viewpoints mostly correspond with rather traditional "non-sociological" concepts which have been customary among Old Testament scholars for years. I allude to the fact that this modest contribution (like other contributions by OTTO)[2] does not contain aspects which may be considered controversial to the same degree as f.e. the endeavours of George E. MENDENHALL and Norman K. GOTTWALD, who stand up for a new interpretation of early Israelite history, not only concerning its origins but also the governing political motivations behind the revolutionary movement which as its outcome had the emergence of the Israelite tribal society[3]. Presumably OTTO is not totally at variance with these American scholars in that the religion was the most important single factor directing the development of specific Israelite features in pre-monarchal times, but just like the new studies by W. THIEL, W. DIETRICH and A. OHLER OTTO has not exploited the many possibilities connected with the application of sociological aspects in dealing with the social development in early Israel and the Israelite society[4].

It is very easy to identify not a few dogmatic standpoints in that short

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1  E. OTTO, Sozialgeschichte Israels. Probleme und Perspektiven. Ein Dis-
   kussionspapier, BN 15 (1981) 87-92 <OTTO 1981>.
2  Cf. especially E. OTTO, Jacob in Sichem, BWANT 110, Stuttgart 1979.
3  Cf. G.E. MENDENHALL, The Tenth Generation, Baltimore 1973, and N.K. GOTT-
   WALD, The Tribes of Yahweh, New York 1979.
4  Cf. W. DIETRICH, Israel und Kanaan, SBS 94, Stuttgart 1979, W. THIEL, Die
   soziale Entwicklung Israels in vorstaatlicher Zeit, Berlin 1980, and A.
   OHLER, Israel. Volk und Land, Stuttgart 1979.

article in the *Biblische Notizen*, which OTTO rather dictates "ex cathedra". Nevertheless, all of them are controversial - even if not to the same extent. Below I shall return to these statements and comment on a selection. Here by way of introduction I have to say that in reality the basic problem is related to how we are able to use sociology in the study of the Old Testament. Is sociology a kind of miraculous remedy which provides us with answers to every unsolved problem (probably this is the opinion of e.g. N.K. GOTTWALD)[5]? Is it a litmus testing the validity of older "sociological" concepts? Or must we assign to it a more modest rôle as one method among others which we may use when we deal with questions of common interest, the origin of Israel and the Israelite society before the monarchy? It goes to say that it is impossible to comment on all those issues to a length in this short paper, but I shall confine myself to indicate how far I disagree with OTTO (and other scholars) in some issues. It might be a stimulus for further debate, and I hope this will concentrate on methodological issues rather than on single points[6].

And now to some specific themes,

1) OTTO argues that there exists a close connection between the type of social organization in a society and the type of religion[7]. Evidently this runs like a reflection of a classical maxime deriving from Max WEBER's concept of the "ideal type" which may largely be compared to the "heuristic models" very much in favour especially among American scholars. Thus a society with only a slight stratification, structured by the existence of a simple family organization, by necessity possesses a simple monolatrious cult. OTTO does not comment on this point of view, he only formulates it a priori. Obviously the problem is related to the universal validity of this maxime. The documentation in the Old Testament may induce the reader to suppose so, e.g. that a family structured pastoral society (the society of the patriarchs) did worship the God of the Fathers, every family its own god. The question is, however, 1) do we in the Old Testament have informations deriving from a period in which a patriarchal society existed thus structured, or are we not

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5  See his introduction to The Tribes of Yahweh, 5-8 ("The Scandal of Socio-
   logical Method").
6  I hope to be able to publish the relevant material in a not too distant
   future.
7  OTTO 1981, 89.

obliged to admit that we only possess reflections of that society dating from a later period – it does'nt really matter whether that later period was the 10th, 9th, 8th, etc., century B.C.,or even the period of the Judges? 2) How universal is the validity of the maxime? Does it apply to all family structured societies, or – if we shall use socio-anthropological terminology – is this a general rule for all band-organized societies? Only an analysis based on a comprehensive documentation from wide selection of such societies may provide us with a well-founded answer. In case the maxime is invalid then the Old Testament scholar is no longer exclusively confronted with a sociological issue, but he also have to concentrate on the documentation in the Old Testament itself in order to deduce from it any possible information. I am not going to pass any sentence here, but I shall only refer to the fact that the idea of a specific patriarchal religion, as described by Albrecht ALT, is no longer totally undisputed – as a consequence of studies especially by Herrmann VORLÄNDER and John VAN SETERS[8].

2) The earliest history of Israel must be studied in the context of the patriarchal society, i.e. a society with a family organization, as OTTO points out[9]. Apparently OTTO thinks that the non-existent tribal organization in the patriarchal traditions proves the historicity of the period of the patriarchs (independently of whether f.e. Abraham may be considered a historical person or not). My first point of criticism is pertinent to the logic. The patriarchal narratives by necessity talk about families without a tribal organization, after all *the patriarchs are not members of tribes, but apical ancestors of tribes*. If the narratives told us that Abraham was member of a tribe – even a tribe called *Rahamu*, which may be mentioned in a Palestinian inscription as maintained by Mario LIVERANI[10] – it would be a contradiction in terms. My second point is related to sociology. What does OTTO have in mind when he talks about a family structured society? All societies with a traditional organization have a family structure in the Middle East, in ancient times as well as today. The real issue, however, is related to the rôle played by the individual family in a society as compared to the rôle played

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8    Cf. H. VORLÄNDER, Mein Gott, AOAT 23, Neukirchen 1975, and J. VAN SETERS, The Religion of the Patriarchs in Genesis, Biblica 61 (1980) 220-233.
9    OTTO 1981, 89.
10   Cf. M. LIVERANI, Un'ipotesa sul nome di Abramo, Henoch 1 (1979) 9-18.

by higher (more comprehensive) levels of social integration. Were the "patriarchs" members of a *band-society* or of a society structured as *lineages*? The answer to this question, moreover, is only relevant, if we know for sure that such a patriarchal period existed, and in the light of Thomas L. THOMPSON's and John VAN SETERS' studies this is rather questionable[11].

3) According to OTTO this society of families was exogamous[12]. This is an unexpected viewpoint compared to the fact that GOTTWALD as well as C.H.J. de GEUS have demonstrated that matrimonial customs in early Israel must have been endogamous[13]. It is obvious that the individual "patriarchal family" was exogamous since brothers did not marry sisters; nevertheless, the system was strictly endogamous because marriages were arranged among persons belonging to the same lineage (Isaac to Rebecca, Jacob to Leah). The patriarchal narratives therefore clearly reflects the ideology behind the matrimonial usage (and to a degree the actual marriage customs) in the Israelite society who transmitted the narratives.

4) OTTO maintains that the limit of the family was the limit of the solidarity[14]. Well, so it is, even today. Thus the argument is at the same time both generally valid and irrelevant; after all we have to ask, is this an absolute limit? Is it the only limit of solidarity in a certain society? Is it a maxime the validity of which only concerns the presumed literary fiction called the patriarchal *narratives*? If the patriarchs were members of a lineage which is indicated by their marriage customs, then we are compelled to distinguish between the solidarity confined to the individual family and the solidarity embracing the lineage which counts the individual patriarchal family as one of its members. It is just the same today, the solidarity, i.e. the possibility for a man to side with a certain group because of common interests, is a variable, you may identify yourself with your family, your place of work, your country, etc. - the solidarity is not exclusive, but you may make common

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11  Cf. Th.L. THOMPSON, The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives, BZAW 133, Berlin 1974, and J. VAN SETERS, Abraham in History and Tradition, New Haven 1975.
12  OTTO 1981, 89.
13  Cf. GOTTWALD, Tribes of Yahweh, 301-315, and C.H.J. de GEUS, The Tribes of Israel. Studia Orientalia Neerlandica 18, Assen 1976, 136-137.
14  OTTO 1981, 90.

cause with different groups at the same time, but not always in the same si-
tuation. Let me quote an example. The local football club plays against the
neighbouring club. You side with the local club against the foreign. The next
week players from both clubs may join together on a regional team to play
against another region, and now you side also with the foreign players on
your team - and so on until the national team or even the team representing
a specific part of the world (f.e. the old member states of the Common Market
against the new members). The limit of solidarity is the family in cases which
only concern the individual village against other villages, or the tribe
against other tribes, etc.[15]

5) The *"Großfamilie"* is composed by a *"Blutsgemeinschaft"* which has a ge-
nealogical structure[16]. Below I shall return to the notion of extended family
which has been rather popular with Old Testament scholarship. Here I shall
confine myself to OTTO's maxime. Obviously OTTO says that the extended family
is based on actual and not fictual consanguinity. This holds true of the *in-
dividual* family. On the other hand it is easy to point at exceptions from the
rule, f.e. cases of adoption or the like. This is, however, not the fundamental
problem. The question is how OTTO defines the extended family. GOTTWALD, for
his part, maintains that the extended family embraces up to five successive
generations at a time, counting as much as fifty to seventy persons or more,
who are living at the same place[17]. There be no doubt, however, that such fa-
milies have never existed in the Middle East, at least in historical times,
but GOTTWALD confounds different socio-political levels, on one hand the *fa-
mily*, on the other the *lineage* to use ordinary sociological terms[18]. Here I
shall limit myself to this point which may be new in an Old Testament context,
and I shall only refer to current anthropological descriptions of the lineage,
and to a study of mine in preparation, in which I intend to present the docu-
mentation.

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15  I owe this "example" to the late Danish social-anthropologist, Johannes
    NICOLAISEN, cf. his Primitive Kulturer, Copenhagen 1963, 204.
16  OTTO 1981, 89f.
17  Cf. GOTTWALD, Tribes of Yahweh, 285.
18  The introduction to M. FORTES and E.E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, African Political
    Systems, Oxford 1940, 1-23, and M. FORTES, The Structure of Unilineal
    Descent Groups, The American Anthropologist 55 (1953) 17-41, are still of
    fundamental importance.

6) OTTO in no way disputes the idea of a *"Sesshaftwerdung"* as relevant
to early Israelite history. It means that although he proposes to introduce
sociological aspects in the study of Israelite history, he totally ignores
the endeavours of some scholars to demonstrate that Israel was not the out-
come of the settlement of "foreign" nomadic tribes, but it had as its origins
a whole series of internal social processes, which took place in the local
"Canaanite" society in Palestine when the Late Bronze Age was near its end
and during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Of course
OTTO's understanding of the text (to which I shall return) is the reason.
Yet, the problems involved in choosing between a settlement of nomadic tribes
or a re-tribalization of peasants (in reality the subject of contestation
between MENDENHALL and GOTTWALD and their critics) demontrate that sociology
by no means is the miraculous remedy which provides us with undisputable facts
which are only obtainable by the application of that approach. After all
settlement as well as re-tribalization are both social processes, and at the
same time they are historical phenomena (in fact all social processes are
historical facts, since they "took place" once). Only adequate analyses of
the complete source material (written as well as archaeological) may provide
us with an approximate background which makes it possible to choose between
the different sociological models. It would be incorrect a priori to decide
that a settlement of foreign tribes took place and then to present a socio-
logical explanation for it, just as it would be incorrect to decide, a priori,
that no settlement took place at all, and then to proceed with sociological
explanation for this hypothesis.

7) In connection with the settlement OTTO talks about a transition from
a pastoral society to a peasant society including an modification of the so-
cial structure. If I have not misread OTTO, he maintains that before the sett-
lement Israel was composed of a pastoral society containing individual and
autonomous families (the patriarchal families), but after the settlement the
basis of the social structure was tribalized peasants[19]. Yet, his sociologi-
cal foundation is more than shaky. The idea of pastoralists (i.e. nomads) in
the Middle East in historical times without a tribal organization is totally
unfounded, though OTTO may define tribal society in a very constricted sence,

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19   OTTO 1981, 90.

so as to leave no room for pastoral societies (a definition which on the other hand would be meaningless). He clearly opposes the current opinions according to which the Israelite tribal society broke up after the settlement. In fact this concept is not better founded, but it has often been advanced and with some justification because the documentation bearing on nomads in ancient times from Ur III through Mari to the Late Bronze Age and beyond bears witness to the fact that the pastoralists were generally organized as tribes. OTTO's misunderstanding is not easy to explain, since not a few anthropologists (even German) have perceived what is the problem. OTTO's misunderstanding is a logical one. He confuses the concepts of social organization and governmental organization, but these are not congruous[20]. A stratified society may have several different kinds of government (as is well known), and so may a tribal society which may f.e. be organized as an egalitarian lineage system (ruled by the heads of the lineages), or as a chiefdom (ruled by a paramount chief and his lineage) or it may totally be without any formal political structure. Thus OTTO is wrong in many aspects. At first we have a sociohistorical misinterpretation, because he maintains that pastoralist culture in the Middle East in ancient times may have been without a tribal structure; secondly he argues that the tribal organization is likely to appear in an agrarian society. Of course Israel in the period of the Judges was an agrarian sedentary peasant and tribal society, but this might be as a consequence of an earlier emigration of pre-existent pastoral tribes, as many scholars still behold. It might, however, on the other hand be as a consequence of the retribalization ("revolutionary" or not) of the pre-existent "Canaanite" population consisting of sedentary peasants as maintained by MENDENHALL and GOTT-WALD (even if we do not simultaneously have to accept their religio-sociological speculations). The sociological analysis may be conducted in a very modest fashion so as to act only as a service subject helping us to a more precise understanding of the real society (i.e. Israel in the period of the Judges). The sociological analysis may on the other hand be taken up in a more "synthetic" fashion, if we direct our attention to the general pre-conditions

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20  Very important in relation to this question is M.G. SMITH, On Segmentary
    Lineage Systems, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 86 (1956)
    39-80. Cf. also the introduction to C. SIGRIST, Regulierte Anarchie,
    Olten und Freiburg 1967, 48-59.

essential to the emergence of tribal societies in a region formerly dominated
by stratified states (city-states as well as empires) in the moment such cen-
tralized states no longer exist[21]. It is possible to explain such a process
in many ways. The explanation may be structuralistic, or evolutionistic, etc.,
but evidently there is room for much more research in the future. A provisio-
nal hypothesis could be that the Middle Eastern societies always contain the
possibility of re-integrating themselves as a social structure different from
the one in existence at the moment, because the families and the lineages
form the basis of the social structure and because the lineages are endoga-
mous[22]. Without an external central government - *"Zentralinstanz"* (thus Chr.
SIGRIST) - the lineage becomes the dominating political body, but the tribe
the maximal political body, whereas in case the political power passes to a
central government and the government thus replaces the tribe as a political
force the tribe disappears leaving behind the underlying lineage structure[23].
Of course this is only a very rough draft of a socio-political model, but it
is noteworthy that such fluctuations between tribalized political systems
and centralized political systems are not uncommon in the history of the Near
East. If we turn to Palestine, we find - as is well-known - a series of fluc-
tuations between centralized systems and tribal systems, at the end of the
Early Bronze Age, at the end of the Late Bronze Age, and in the Ottoman period.
No massive immigration of "foreign" peoples is necessary to explain these
social processes - after all such invasions may be invisible from an archaeo-
logical  point of view[24].

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21  Essentially this is a basic theme in several of M. LIVERANI's studies
    and has induced him to give a positive reception to MENDENHALL's theses,
    cf. the synthesis , La struttura politica, in S. MOSCATI, L'Alba della
    civiltà I, Torino 1976, 281-309.
22  The lineage is the maximal endogamous unit (at least according to its
    own ideology).
23  Cf. the idea of a "reserve ideology" advanced by P.C. SALZMAN, an Ameri-
    can anthropologist, who has spezialized on the Middle Eastern nomadic
    societies. According to SALZMAN such a "reserve ideology" or "asserted
    ideology" is present in many Middle Eastern societies even if only as a
    latent ideological stimulus. It reappears, however, as the governing ideo-
    logy in the moment the political circumstances (the weakening or dis-
    appearance of centralized government) are favorable to a change. Cf.P.C.
    SALZMAN, Ideology and Change in the Middle Eastern Tribal Societies, Man
    NS 13 (1978) 618-637 (cf. also the same author, Does Complementary Oppo-
    sition Exist? The American Anthropologist 80 (1978) 53-70).

8) According to OTTO the patriarchal society consisted of *"unverbundene Großfamilien"*[25]. Above I contested the relevance of band-societies to the discussion of social structure in the Middle East in ancient times although I do not exclude the possibility of such systems in prehistoric times, or even in the remotest parts of the area in historical times. Here I have to deal with the idea of the extended family which OTTO never defines, evidently adhering to earlier descriptions like f.e. the one by Martin NOTH[26]. To a large degree even GOTTWALD follows this line of explanation, although he introduces some additional aspects[27]. This is, really, one of the oldest myth pertaining to Old Testament scholarship, saying that the Semitic peoples as their basic structure had the extended family, which later broke up in connection with the emergence of more centralized political systems. To a degree this concept is related to neo-evolutionary ideas of the developments from band-society to tribal society, and from chiefdoms to stratified states[28]. It is, however, obvious that it is almost impossible to demonstrate this hypothesis on the basis of the available source material from the Ancient Near East. I shall refer to one example. Modern anthropologists working in the Near East have shown an astonishing continuity between the different societal levels as far as it concerns the size of families and the rate of extended families as compared to nuclear families. The number of extended families seldom surpasses ten percent of the total number of families in a certain society, and the normal nuclear family averages five to seven persons[29]. It is, however, in-

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24  Cf. to the end of the EB period M. LIVERANI, Per una considerazione storica del problemo Amorreo, OA 9 (1970) 5-27 (and his, The Amorites, in D.J. WISEMAN (ed.), Peoples of Old Testament Times, Oxford 1973, 100-133), and now especially the discussion in BASOR 237 (1980) by W.G. DEVER and others. Cf. to the Ottoman period M. SHARON, The Political Role of the Bedouin in Palestine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, in M. MA'OZ (ed.), Studies on Palestine During the Ottoman Period, Jerusalem 1975, 11-30, and W.-D. HÜTTEROTH, Schwankungen von Siedlungsdichte und Siedlungsgrenze in Palästina und Transjordanien seit dem 16.Jahrhundert, in Deutscher Geographentag Kiel 1969. Verhandlungen des Deutschen Geographentages 37, Wiesbaden 1970, 463-475. As to the end of the LB Period I see no need to cite the relevant literature in this forum.
25  OTTO 1981, 91.
26  Cf. M. NOTH, Die Welt des Alten Testaments, 4.Ausg., Berlin 1962, 58f.
27  Cf. GOTTWALD, The Tribes of Yahweh, 285-292.
28  As described in f.e. E.R. SERVICE, Primitive Social Organization, 2.ed. New York 1971.
29  Cf. J. GULICK, The Middle East: An Anthropological Perspective, Pacific

teresting to note that the average size of the family in the agrarian socie-
ty at Ugarit (and presumably also at Alalakh) in the Late Bronze Age were 6.4
persons according to the calculations of Michail HELTZER[30]. Furthermore, it
is necessary to stress that the extended families do not contain fifty to
seventy or more persons, but they are as a rule just families somewhat lar-
ger than nuclear families (perhaps ten to fifteen individuals in average),
and they are present only at the highest levels in the society, among the
elite. Therefore OTTO's idea of a pre-Israelite pastoral society composed of
autonomous extended families is most likely fictious.

Thus the different assertions put foreward by OTTO are without proper
sociological foundation, but on the other hand the crucial point is OTTO's
way of understanding the text, because this has put him off the track. Ob-
viously OTTO again confuses two different logical levels, a textual and a
factual. Irrespective of any manoeuvres made by the advocates of literary
criticism, form criticism, tradition history, etc. (the relevance of which
I have no intention to deny), it is impossible to reach the historical event
itself. At best we have a text describing the event. Nevertheless, the text
is never identical with the event, but it represents an interpretation of
the event. This applies to events of the day where we may find one and the
same phenomenon described in totally different ways (sometimes so different
that it is hardly possible to ascertain whether it is the same event) reflec-
ting the narrator's (or writer's) political or religious sentiments or ideo-
logy. This argument is of course even more valid when related to ancient times,
although it has been a great problem to many scholars to grasp the ideological
incentive behind the description of a certain event, made by a writer perhaps
on the basis of other sources (written or oral) unknown to us but also trans-
mitted through a number of "filtres"[31].

I shall limit myself to these remarks and I am not going to criticize the
religio-sociological observations in OTTO's paper, but of course my comments

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Palisades 1976, 128ff.
30   Cf.M. HELTZER, The Rural Community in Ancient Ugarit, Wiesbaden 1976, 102-112.
31   Cf. in this connection the very important description of the problems in-
     volved in the study of early Israel in M. LIVERANI, Le "origini" d'Israele
     progetto irrealizzabile di ricerca etnogenetica, Rivista Biblica Italiana
     26 (1980) 9-31. Unfortunately it is only published in Italian which may
     prohibit a due recognition of his many relevant points.

on the relation between a textual level and a factual one are valid also in this connection. It is obvious that OTTO's religio-sociological ideas are related to points of view, we find in the work of MENDENHALL and GOTTWALD, who emphasize the rôle of religion as a prime mover in early Israel. By doing so he evidently neglects GOTTWALD's warnings, as he tells us not to stress a single cultural component arbitrarily selected from its total socio-cultural context[32]. The special rôle assigned to Israel's Yahwistic religion of course constitutes the foundation of MENDENHALL's and GOTTWALD's "revolutionary" ideas, but also of OTTO's reconstruction of the development which took place in early Israel. This emphasizes my viewpoint that sociology is not a miraculous remedy, because the historical reconstruction of f.e. OTTO and GOTTWALD are very different. My real theme is, however, the necessity to be aware of the possibilities of sociology as well as its limits when applied to the study of ancient Israel. The scholar who wants to make use of a sociological viewpoint has to study the various sociological tendencies in a serious way in order to understand the many different approaches followed by the various schools of thought. It is without consequence whether we make use of antiquated ideal types, deriving from the work of Max WEBER, or we base our theory building on structuralistic sociology, either following in the path of C. LÉVI-STRAUSS or British anthropologists like Edmund LEACH, or we are enchanted by the spectacular theses advanced by neo-evolutionarian anthropologists (as in fact MENDENHALL and GOTTWALD are). The method in question is always the "filtre" through which we study our subject, and the results depend on the method. If neither we nor our readers are aware of this fact it is impossible to interpret the messages intended for our readers, and it is also impossible for us to know the limitations of our own results[33].

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32  Cf.  N.K. GOTTWALD, Domain Assumptions and Societal Models in the Study of Pre-Monarchic Israel, SVT 28 (1975) 89-100, "domain assumption" no. 3.
33  I hope that my intentions in publishing this critical review of OTTO's paper is not misunderstood. The reason for directing my criticisms against OTTO is of course his contribution to the BN 15. The same kind of criticism could just as well be directed against the three studies mentioned in n.4 above, especially against W. THIEL, whose study is the most ambitious but still perpetuating not a few conventional notions dear to Old Testament scholarship. Neither do I want to be identified with the "revolutionary" party, cf. my critical assessment of especially GOTTWALD, Tribes of Yahweh, in N.P. LEMCHE, Det revolutionære Israel, Dansk teologisk Tidsskrift 45 (1982) 16-39, and my "Hebrew" as a National Name for Israel, Studia Theologica 33 (1979) 1-23.