

HOT PURSUIT INTO CANAAN

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And the Canaanite, the King of Arad who dwelt in the Negev heard that Israel came by way of Atarim and he fought against Israel and took some of them captive. And Israel vowed unto the Lord and said, 'If you will indeed deliver this people into my hand then I will utterly destroy [herem] their cities.' And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites and they utterly destroyed them and their cities and the name of the place was called Hormah (Num. 21:1-3).

And the Canaanites, the King of Arad who dwelt in the Negev in the land of Canaan, heard of the coming of the children of Israel (Num. 33:40).

Several commentators question the historicity of these events in the light of the following fragment in the Book of Judges which deals with the period of settlement:¹

And the children of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up out of the city of palm-trees with the children of Judah into the wilderness of Judah which is in the Negev of Arad and they went and dwelt with the people. And Judah went with Simeon his brother and they smote the Canaanites that inhabited Zephath and utterly destroyed it [herem] and the name of the city was called Hormah (Jud. 1:16-18).

Do the citations in Numbers and Judges refer to the same event, and if so when did it take place? The occurrence of many of the same names and terms in both sources (emphasis in boldface) would indicate that they do. But if so, then one of them would have to be an anachronism.

Let us retrace the sequence of events in the Book of Numbers. In the 40th year after the Exodus, the Israelites leave the oasis of Kadesh-Barnea finally headed eastward towards the land of Canaan, and arrive at Mount Hor on the border of Edom.² They had hoped to secure permission to traverse

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Edom and proceed up the eastern side of the Salt Sea and the Jordan to the plains of Moab. However, Edom would not permit them to cross its territory and so the Israelites are forced to turn south along the *derekh yam suf* [Way of the Reed Sea] for the long and arduous trek down to Elath and back up and around Edom on the east side through the wilderness of Moab. However, in journeying from Kadesh to Mount Hor, the Israelites were skirting the southern boundary of the land of Canaan, using a well-known and exposed road, the *derekh atarim* [Way of Atarim]. Canaanites living in the eastern Negev of *the land of Canaan* (Num. 33:40) and led by a *King of Arad* "heard" of the strung out columns of Israelites on the road just south of their border and sensing easy prey attacked the baggage trains and took captives.³

In the hope of enlisting Divine aid in rescuing the captives, the Israelites pledge to render the enemy and the booty *herem*, which they do once they are victorious. They then call the "place" Hormah.⁴

There are several unusual features to this incident. The initiative to respond to the attack seems to be taken solely by the people, Israel. There is no mention of Moses, either as having ordered the counterattack or as having been consulted. One must also wonder as to the intensity and magnitude of the Israelite response which invites comparison with their response to the very first unprovoked attack upon Israel after the Exodus, made by the infamous Amalek (Ex. 17:8-13). Then the attack was met by a very deliberate defense, by a picked force, planned and participated in by Moses, which only results in weakening the enemy. Now, 40 years later, a similarly unprovoked and evidently surprise attack is met by what seems to be a deep and lethal incursion into the land of Canaan with destruction of the enemy and its "cities" (villages?).⁵

With what forces did Israel wage this war and enter enemy territory? That the new generation of Israelites, hardened by desert conditions would be able to give "hot pursuit" and destroy the bases of a loosely organized group of cross-border raiders is to be expected. However, what is not plausible is the implication of the text that although now, finally embarked on the last leg of the journey to the Promised Land, the Israelites would pause for a major military campaign to be fought by the standing army of Israel deep in the land of Canaan.

The following is an interpretation suggested by the historian Ze'ev Yavitz, which I believe relieves many of the indicated difficulties and brings the Numbers and Judges sources into meaningful relationship.⁶

1. On the assumption that the sources cited refer to the same event, the most complete account (giving most information) is to be found in the four verses of Numbers, suggesting that this is our main and earliest source and reflects the period of the actual occurrence.

2. The first chapter of Judges describes how, after the death of Joshua, the era of military campaigns by the united tribes (or groups of tribes) against enemy coalitions came to an end. Then began the efforts of individual tribes to conquer and settle their allotted portions, beginning with the tribe of Judah in the south. In the course of this account, we are told (1:16, see above) that the tribe of Judah, joined by the tribe of Simeon, smote the Canaanites somewhere in the Negev Arad, where they conquered a place called Zephath and named it Hormah.

Yavitz proposes that the editor of Judges, wishing to provide a full account of the conquests of its territory by the tribe of Judah, reached all the way back to the days of Moses to include a very early, pre-settlement military victory that started on the *Derekh Atarim* between Kadesh and Mount Hor. And yes, it was an expedition handled solely by the tribes of Judah and Simeon.⁸ So why does Numbers attribute the victory to Israel collectively?

3. Yavitz shows how the conquest of several cities, such as Hebron and De-
vir, described in one source as having been achieved by particular individuals of the tribe of Judah (Jud. 1:10), are elsewhere attributed to Joshua and the people of Israel as a whole (Josh. 10:36, 37). Thus, it can be maintained that the event in Numbers (21:1-3) was indeed an operation undertaken independently by the powerful and leading tribe of Judah but remembered in the national archive as a victory for Israel, the nation. However, in listing the history of the tribal conquests of its own territory, the editor of Judges thought it proper to bring forward what had happened much earlier, which was really the first conquest by the tribe of Judah of some of its future territory with the changing of the name of the area from Zephath to Hormah, a name which persisted into the future.

And as Yavitz points out, it may very well have been Moses' memory of Judah's role in that early unauthorized but evidently Divinely approved incur-

sion into Canaan that lay behind his single-sentence blessing to the tribe of Judah: *'Hear, Lord, the voice of Judah [compare and the Lord heard the voice of Israel (Num. 21:3)]. And bring him to his people [lest in his strength and independence he separate himself from the other tribes]. His hands shall contend for him [He seems capable of taking care of himself]. And You shall be a help against his enemies [yet he will need Your help] (Deut. 33:7).*

NOTES

1. See Ibn Ezra and Ramban.
2. This is the station where Aaron the High Priest dies and is buried.
3. Tel Arad is located in the eastern Negev portion of Judah (sometimes called Negev Arad) about 20 miles south of Hebron and east of Beersheba.
4. According to excavations there may not have been a walled city called Arad or Hormah at this time, so these names may refer to a general area. Thus the title "King of Arad" may simply refer to the political leader of the area. The rabbis understood *herem* to be a status in which the enemy is destroyed and the booty consecrated to the priesthood.
5. Indeed, some of the rabbis say that these Canaanites were actually Amalek in disguise. See Rashi on Numbers 21:1.
6. *Toledot Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Achiever, 1932) vol. 1, pp. 167-169, n. 22.
7. It is generally agreed that some of the events described in the Book of Judges may overlap the chronology of the Book of Joshua.
8. Two related facts that support the theory that it was the tribe of Judah that organized the incursion into Canaan are: (1) During the march through the wilderness it was the tribe of Judah – *degel mahaneh Yehudah* – that led the way, giving it a sense of responsibility, and (2) A prominent member of the tribe of Judah, Caleb ben-Yephuneh, had been through that territory years earlier as a member of the *meraglim* [scouts], making him an ideal guide for the expedition.