

“DAN TO BEERSHEBA” :

THE LITERARY HISTORY OF THE PHRASE, AND THE  
HISTORICAL PROBLEMS IT RAISES.

THE investigation is suggested by the story of the removal of the ark to Jerusalem. According to one text David gave festive portions not only to the crowd that happened to be gathered to behold the festivities or to take part in them, but also to every man and woman from Dan to Beersheba. This is the account of the LXX. The MT and the Peshitta omit the phrase “from Dan to Beersheba.” Which is correct? Of course it is perfectly clear that the LXX. account is unhistorical; but that does not prove it to be interpolated. When we examine the Greek text more closely, however, we cannot have much doubt that the phrase “Dan to Beersheba” is merely a marginal gloss; for it has made its way in at different places in the texts represented by the editions of Swete and Lagarde respectively.

Thus supplied with positive evidence of a tendency to interpolate the phrase, we proceed to inquire whether we may assume it to be original in the other places where it occurs.

1. *Examination of passages.*—We read in Judges 20. 1 that “the congregation was assembled as one man, from Dan even to Beersheba, with the land of Gilead, unto Yahwè at Mizpah,” in order to examine into the outrage on the Levite’s concubine. That this statement, as we now read it, reflects post-exilic ideas is admitted. The utmost that might be questioned is whether the particular phrase under consideration may not belong to an older narrative worked up by the post-exilic editor. Budde, in his new commentary, maintains that it does. For our present purpose, however, his verdict is of no use. It is founded on the assertion that elsewhere the phrase we are discussing is found in

early writers, whereas the date of the phrase is the very thing we wish to determine. Moore, on the other hand, appears to see no reason to sever the phrase from its post-exilic context. This seems much more plausible. The earlier sources do not countenance any such fantastic conception as that of a gathering of all Israel from Dan to Beersheba in the pre-monarchic age even for purposes of war, far less for the purpose of conducting a judicial investigation.

We come next to the one passage containing the expression in the Book of Kings. The question is complicated by the well-known intricate relations of the texts represented by the Hebrew and by the Greek respectively. The phrase occurs in a passage that is found at this point (1 Kings 4. 24 f. [5. 4 f.]) only in A of the Greek MSS. cited in Swete, and it is certainly the easiest view that the Greek of B and of Lagarde's edition represents an earlier state of the text. The text of B and of Lagarde, indeed, inserts the passage in chapter 2;<sup>1</sup> but their presence seems not more natural there than it does in chapter 5. The Hebrew runs thus: "And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon."<sup>2</sup> Kamphausen, in Kautzsch's *Die Heilige Schrift*, assigns the verses in Kings to the second half of the Exile. Meyer, in his most recent work,<sup>3</sup> assigns them to Persian times, on account of their use of עֵבֶר הַיְּזָרַיִם for the Persian trans-Euphratic province.

Nor can we assign a much earlier date to the third passage, the only passage in 1 Samuel: "And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was estab-

<sup>1</sup> The text of Lagarde at verses 31 and 32, that of B at verses 46 f. and 46 g. in Swete.

<sup>2</sup> The recurrence of the metaphor of the vine and the fig tree verbatim in Mic. 4. 4, and of a very similar expression in 2 Kings 18. 31 = Isa. 36. 16, gives no light as to the date. The phrase is probably proverbial, and the date of the passages cited is itself uncertain.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Entstehung des Judenthums*, p. 20, note 2.

lished to be a prophet of Yahwè" (1 Sam. 3. 20). Budde strangely states in *The Sacred Books of the Old Testament* (*ad loc.*) that this verse is omitted by the LXX. The fact is that it occurs twice over with interesting variations. The most noteworthy point for our present purpose is that in the second form of the statement the phrase we are considering does not occur, the place it occupies in our present Hebrew text being taken by the expression "from one end of the land to the other end of the land," which is almost identical with a phrase occurring repeatedly in Deuteronomy. Budde assigns the verse in 1 Samuel to E<sub>2</sub> —*i.e.*, probably the first part of the 7th century B.C. We may be pretty sure it is not earlier. If the alternative Deuteronomistic expression found in the LXX. is the older, we can hardly regard our present Hebrew phrase as earlier than exilic.

Four cases remain, all in 2 Samuel. The first is in a somewhat impossible speech put into the mouth of Abner (3. 10). He threatens Ishbosheth that he will translate the kingdom from the house of Saul, and set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah from Dan even to Beersheba. The impossibility of such a speech from Abner, since we have no reason to suppose that Saul ever ruled over anything like so extensive a territory, is no reason for refusing to accept Budde's assignment of it to the source he calls J. On the other hand, we cannot be sure that the verse really belongs to the passage. If we grant the originality of the addition to *v.* 9 (*ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ταύτῃ* at the end) in Lucian's recension, supported by B, then *v.* 10 may well be a later accretion. The phraseology would very well suit a late date. The phrase "throne of David" makes one think of some student of Jeremiah. It occurs in Isaiah 9. 7; but it is not now possible in argument to assume that that passage is pre-exilic.

The second occurrence in 2 Samuel also is in a speech

(17. 11). Here, again, the question is not whether Hushai could have used the words in counselling Absalom to gather all Israel together before venturing to pursue David, but whether they belong to the original narrative; and if so, when it was written.

In the precise form used here, the simile of the sand of the sea occurs elsewhere only once—viz., in 1 Kings 4. 20,<sup>1</sup> in a verse belonging to a context which we have already found reason to suspect of being late. In slightly different forms, however, the simile occurs very frequently, and is found as early as J (Judg. 7. 12).

We have now examined five of the seven cases, and while some have been found to be certainly later than the Exile, only one has betrayed no obvious note of affinity with late writings as distinguished from early. Even in that case, however, there is nothing positive against a late date.

The remaining two instances (2 Sam. 24. 2, 15) occur in the story of the census and the pestilence, a story the early date of which there is no obvious reason to call in question. Kittel hesitates to what source to assign it; Budde attributes it to the source that he equates with J. The question that concerns us, however, is the date not of the story, but of the clauses containing the expression, "Dan to Beersheba." Now it is precisely the geographical details in this story that arouse one's suspicion. The text is so corrupt that it is difficult to form a critical estimate as to date. The geographical passage does not look old. "Hivites"<sup>2</sup> is a term that occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament except with reference to the settlement in Palestine. An early writer would scarcely have thought of

<sup>1</sup> An editor describes the vast multitudes of Israel, or, as the MT reads, of Israel and Judah, eating and drinking and making merry.

<sup>2</sup> It may be a corrupt reading; but cf. "Canaanites," and, in the Peshitta, "Jebusites."

making the census extend to Tyre or Sidon. We can hardly resist the suspicion that *vv.* 5-7 are a later addition; and the conjecture is perhaps confirmed by a comparison with the version of the story preserved in 1 Chronicles 21. It would seem that the text as it lay before the Chronicler passed directly from *v.* 4 to *v.* 8. No doubt he is abbreviating the story at this point; but could the Chronicler, whose fondness for statistical details we know so well, have resisted the temptation to incorporate the geographical details that now stand in 2 Samuel had they been present in his authority? Dropping *vv.* 5-7 does not remove the phrase “Dan to Beersheba” in *vv.* 2 and 15; but it adds weight to any other reason for suspecting interpolation. There is such a reason. In verse 15, the account of the pestilence, the Chronicler gives no sign of having found the words, “from Dan to Beersheba,” in his authority. It would certainly be natural for the editor who added the other geographical details to add this detail also.

The case of verse 2 is different. We have proof of a very interesting kind (to this we shall return) that the phrase already stood in the text of Samuel used by the Chronicler. The question whether it was original or interpolated, however, is not thus decided.

We have now examined all the passages where the phrase occurs. There are seven in the Hebrew, eight in the Greek. In only two cases were we not confronted with some (at least plausible) positive ground for suspecting interpolation.

2. *When did the phrase originate?*—The general result of the preceding investigation is to establish the phrase as a favourite with late writers. There is one consideration, however, that rather suggests that it was not coined in post-exilic times. The Chronicler seems to have liked the phrase—this strengthens the conviction that he would not have omitted it had it been present in 2 Samuel 24. 15—

for he introduced it into his embellished account of the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30. 5); but he wrote "Beersheba to Dan," not "Dan to Beersheba"; and when he incorporated an earlier passage (the story of David's census) in which the words occur with the name of Dan placed first, he changed the order to that which seemed to him the more appropriate. Whether the preference was peculiar to him or was shared by all the men of his time, we need not consider here (the question belongs to a wider investigation which must be reserved for another place). In any case the preference seems to betray the fact that the original phrase represented the circumstances of an age that was past. When Lucian's recension of the LXX. restores the phrase (in the two passages in Chronicles) to the common form, this is a mere harmonistic correction. The Massoretic reading, with Beersheba first, was difficult for the post-canonical reader who knew the passages in Samuel. On the other hand, from the standpoint of the Chronicler it would be natural to put Beersheba first. A theoretical writer who regarded a proclamation by Hezekiah to all Israel as a natural thing, would think of it as proceeding from Beersheba to Dan.<sup>1</sup> The phrase "Dan to Beersheba" originated, therefore, at a time when there prevailed a set of conditions different from those known to the Chronicler. In other words, its origin is much earlier.

If, then, it was an inheritance from pre-exilic times, when and how did it originate? and why is it specially favoured by late writers?

Can the form of the phrase give us any further hint? Perhaps it can. Surely the peculiarity which showed that the phrase is not post-exilic also makes it probable that the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. his phrase "From Beersheba to Mount Ephraim" (2 Chron. 19. 4), and in Neh. 11. (vv. 27 and 30), "Beersheba to the Valley of Hinnom." The same principle is exemplified, though in the opposite way, in Josiah's going "from Geba to Beersheba" (2 Kings 23. 8).

words embody an idea prevalent at some time or other in northern, rather than in southern, Israel.

It is difficult, however, to believe that the phrase can have been applicable during the time of the divided monarchy.

Unfortunately our knowledge of the conditions that then prevailed north of Jezreel is very imperfect. The population in the neighbourhood of Dan appears to have been, even in very early times, largely Aramæan. W. Max Müller has argued from the forms of the names in the Šešonk list that Aramaic influence was prominent in Palestine in the 10th century B.C. However that may be—and there is room for doubt—Maacah and Beth-Rehob were apparently Aramæan. Where the latter was we perhaps do not know exactly, but Dan would seem to have been, strictly speaking, within it. The Book of Kings represents Benhadad—*i.e.*, Bir-idri of Damascus—as having to *take* Dan from Baasha (15. 20). However matters may have stood before that, as Tell el Kādi, the modern representative of Dan, is only some fifteen hours distant from Damascus, so vigorous a state as Damascus was would be loath to let slip out of its hands a centre of such importance. The fact that Dan does not occur in the list of northern districts seized by Tiglath-pileser in the following century, makes it questionable whether Israel was ever after able to assert political supremacy there. Dan, therefore, hardly contributed anything to the political life of the nation—Bilhah was but a concubine. The important fact that there are indications that it was long felt to be in *some* sense an integral part of Israel—in fact an ancient centre of Israelitish life and thought (so an early source in 2 Samuel) with a Mosaic priesthood—will claim our attention later.

To question Dan's having been a real frontier town of northern Israel may be an excess of caution. In the case of Beersheba, however, the caution seems to be fully warranted. It could hardly have been natural for northern

Israel to speak of Beersheba as a territorial boundary on the south. There is, indeed, some reason to believe that, during part of the reign of the house of Omri, Judah stood to Israel, to all intents and purposes, in the position of a vassal state. It is perhaps conceivable that at such a time people, at least at the court of Samaria, might have spoken of Beersheba as the southern limit of Israel's power. We may suspect, however, that for long periods this could hardly have been much more than a courtly fiction—of the same kind, though not of the same degree, as the English claim to France, which survived on English coins till the end of last century. There was, indeed, as we know, a very close bond of *some* kind between north Israel and Beersheba in particular (to this we shall return); but it is doubtful whether the territorial stretch down to that town was so dominated by northern Israel as to make natural the use of the proverbial phrase. The political conditions of the 9th and the 8th centuries, therefore, will hardly account for the phrase we are discussing, which moreover is not used in any narrative relating to a period later than the time of Solomon.

Can we, then, suppose it to have originated in the time of David? Surely his sway extended to Dan and to Beersheba. Some may regard even this as uncertain. There is great difficulty in distinguishing between what is legendary and what is, in kernel at least, historical in the story of the hero king. It is unsafe to dogmatize. Such positive evidence as there is of David's power having extended so far in any effective degree is not contemporary. The real original basis of his power was in the Judahite and other southern clans, and yet here, at a somewhat advanced period of his reign (as the story reads in the present Book of Samuel), was the very seat of a most formidable rebellion. Abel-beth-maacah, a few miles from Dan, was the remote district to which Sheba, another rebel leader, fled for refuge.



No doubt the editor of the Book of Samuel as we have it obviously intends to represent David's dominion as of far-reaching extent and imposing strength. His materials, however, if they are at all correctly arranged, perhaps hardly fit his scheme. We know how strong for later writers was the temptation to glorify the past, and how far they yielded to it.

Nor is there in the list of Solomon's prefects in 1 Kings 4. much to suggest that he had any effective authority as far north as Dan. Just as little is there any allusion to control as far south as Beersheba.

All this makes one feel that it is not safe to assume that if David's sway extended to both these places it was stable and effective. It would be difficult for him to resist the aspirations of the Aramæans. The circumstances would hardly favour the creation of a phrase such as we are considering—a phrase, that is, current among the people and probably originated by them. All peoples are slow to accommodate their phraseology to new conditions. In modern Egypt, *e.g.*, a new decimal coinage has been in existence for a dozen years, and yet people still calculate (or did so quite recently) in the old terms—just as we pay in guineas, though none has been coined since 1817. So old Egyptian names of towns have survived till the present day, whilst the Greek names bestowed upon them in Ptolemaic times failed to establish themselves. That “Dan to Beersheba” was not really a popular expression but a mere official formula seems unlikely. If the court at Jerusalem had coined a phrase of this kind, is it not probable that the names would have stood, as they stand centuries later in the work of the Chronicler, in inverted order?

The main difficulty, however, is this. If the phrase was in use then in a territorial sense, is it likely that it could survive centuries during which, as we have seen, it could

not be used in a political sense, and then in some way become common in later Judæan writers?

We have thus found it difficult to assign the rise of the phrase to any period between David and the fall of the northern kingdom. May we then turn to the 7th century? The Chronicler seems to have thought that Hezekiah extended his claims as far as Dan. The idealizing of the claims of Israel may not have been confined to literature. Indeed it is probable that, as a vassal state, Judah extended its authority some distance northwards. We cannot suppose, however, that "Dan to Beersheba" could have represented in the 7th century or later anything but an ideal claim. Can we then regard it as possible that it never was a description of actual political conditions; that it was simply used retrospectively or otherwise by writers who delighted to idealize the dignity of their people? This is a possible hypothesis, though hazardous. To discuss it here would require an examination of certain other analogous formulæ, and this we must reserve for another place. Even if we adopted the hypothesis, however, we should still have to inquire on what principle the terms of the phrase were selected, and so we shall proceed to consider whether there is any principle other than political on which we can suppose the selection to have been based.

3. *A possible non-political meaning of the phrase.*—The first thing to strike one is that the terms are not lines (boundaries) but points. The real boundaries mentioned in the Old Testament are generally such natural features as rivers<sup>1</sup> or wildernesses—features which furnish more or less definite lines,—and the confusion characteristic of much of the geographical description in the Old Testament is usually to be ascribed to curtailment of sources or to other conditions of late editorial workmanship: the Israelites knew

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* the river (Euphrates), the *Nahal Miṣraim* or (so called) river of Egypt (the Wady el-'Arish), the Jordan, and so on.

how to define a boundary. Almost in every place where the phrase occurs what is treated of is not a delimitation of contiguous territories but a supposed gathering of the people or a visitation of them in the centres of population.

Elsewhere<sup>1</sup> the present writer has suggested that the origin of the phrase is perhaps to be found not in the political but in the religious life of Palestine. Dan and Beersheba were very famous sanctuaries and were visited as such by Israelites of the northern kingdom. If they were the most distant sanctuaries commonly so visited, a phrase "Dan to Beersheba" might readily come into use. It need not surprise us to find such a phrase surviving the downfall of Samaria. There is reason to suppose that, alongside of their jealousy of the northern kingdom, people in the south were conscious of a certain pride and national proprietorship in the superior glory of Israel. They would not preserve a north Israelite territorial phrase, perhaps; but they might share a phrase of a somewhat different meaning.

As the sanctuaries were very ancient the phrase also may be ancient, even premonarchic. As conditions changed and the popular religion was gradually modified by the influences represented by Deuteronomy and the Priestly Law Book, the phrase would change its meaning. In time it would be assumed to have had a political significance. Its popularity, therefore, with later writers would be due to its apparent confirmation of the erroneous conception they had formed of the early history of their people.

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<sup>1</sup> In a paper read at a meeting of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology (for an abstract see the *Proceedings* for 1898, p. 35 f.). The paper included also an outline of the argument of this article.