

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

LINGUISTIC OBSERVATIONS ON THE PRIESTLY TERM 'EDAH  
AND THE LANGUAGE OF P

by

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The final word on the vital question of the dating of the Priestly Source (P) in the Pentateuch has yet to be given. Indeed it is already obvious that the linguistic aspect of this problem has not received the proper attention it deserves. This is most regrettable since research in biblical and post-biblical Hebrew linguistics has made the most impressive achievements and it lies within its power to aid us greatly in establishing chronological distinctions within biblical literature. The linguistic discipline is capable of making a most important contribution to the problem which concerns us, because its methodology is not affected by the exegetical and theological issues which occupy Higher Criticism, nor is it subscribed to any controversial theories and assumptions upon which non-linguistic approaches are often founded.

An illustration of the method of linguistic examination which we have mentioned will be furnished by an analysis of the Priestly term 'edah whose appearance in a biblical text is considered by many scholars a clear indication of a late date of composition (or redaction) of the text. Thus, R. de Vaux<sup>1</sup> speaks of Nu. 35: "The role accorded to the religious community, the 'edah, and the mention of the high priest ... shows that it [Nu. 35] was edited after the exile". In our opinion, an unbiased philological-linguistic examination indicates not only that the use of the word 'edah is not a late one, but that, inasmuch as it has chronological implication, it is actually indicative of an early period. Following are the principal arguments for this thesis.

1. *Distribution of the word within biblical literature*

The use of the term 'edah with the technical Priestly meaning of "the assembly of Israel" (or a part thereof) is most common in the Pentateuch, where it appears more than one hundred times; its use in the For-

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לשמושו של המונח הכוהני "עדה" בספרות המקראית.

<sup>1</sup> R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 1, 1961, p. 162.

mer Prophets is considerably less frequent – twenty times – and it is almost completely absent from the Prophetic writings and the Historiographical literature describing subsequent periods. Among the literary prophets, Hosea and Jeremiah use it but three times; Ezekiel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles do not use it at all, except for a mere one time in II Chr. 5:6, and this is a verse clearly dependent upon the parallel passage in I Ki. 8:5.

The conclusion, therefore, is that in later biblical literature, in contrast to the situation reflected in the Pentateuch, the term 'edah is not employed, neither in descriptions of daily reality nor within the framework of utopian vision. The Priestly term, found many times in the later books of the Bible (Ezra, Nehemiah and the Chronicles) is *qahal* and not 'edah.

## 2. Distribution of the word in extra-biblical Jewish sources

The Hebrew Talmudic sources also testify to the fact that in the post-exilic period, the term 'edah disappeared from living language. This term is, in fact, found only in biblical quotations or paraphrases. The Aramaic of the Targums also demonstrates this phenomenon since the biblical *qahal* is translated by *qahla*; 'edah is translated into *kenishta* and never into 'edta (which is known to us from Syriac), showing that 'edah/'edta is not current in the Jewish sources of this period.

This is further proved by the Aramaic inscriptions of the ancient synagogues at Jericho and Ma'on (near Gaza), in which we do not find 'edta but *qahla* (in the Jewish Palestinian orthography: *qhlh*). The only sources from this period in which one may find a considerable use of the word 'edah are Ben-Sira and the Qumran Scrolls. However, these two sources are well-known for their tendency to imitate the earlier language of the Bible. Therefore, if we find that both late biblical books and Talmudic sources do not actually use 'edah, we must conclude that the word had passed out of usage in the living language. The appearance of 'edah in Ben-Sira and in the Scrolls might reflect an artificial archaism and, consequently, these two sources cannot be considered in this case as reliable evidence of the actual linguistic usage of that time.

## 3. The Ancient Near Eastern parallels

Side by side with the general meaning of "assembly", the Priestly term 'edah in the Bible also denotes a social body with institutional functions in the "primitive democracy" which preceded monarchial rule in Israel. This usage has an exact parallel in the Mesopotamian term *puchru* which is similarly common in texts dealing with the pre-monarchial period in Mesopotamia. It is true that, from chronological and geographical points of view, there is no direct connection between the *puchru* in Mesopotamia and

the *'edah* in Israel; yet the two parallel linguistic phenomena indicate the decline of a similar institution, belonging to the "primitive democracy", after the stabilization of monarchic rule. An important link between *'edah* and *puchru* is found in Ugaritic literature, where we have both *pchr'ilm* and *'dt'ilm*. The latter has been identified with the biblical poetical idiom *'adat 'el* (Ps. 82:1) and both are actually attributed by scholars to a very early period. It is our contention that, in the light of all the material adduced, the *'edah* of P must also be viewed in this context and not as an isolated phenomenon detached from its linguistic environment.

The example of *'edah* discussed above, which links the language of P to the pre-exilic period, is by no means exceptional or isolated. Elsewhere<sup>2</sup> we spoke at length about the Priestly term *shesh*, "fine linen", which is common in the Pentateuch and, from chronological-linguistic viewpoint, is also indicative of the early period. It has already been shown that *shesh* fell out of use in the post-exilic language, which uses *butz* instead. And, of course, there are other examples as well. These facts, we believe, point up the need to examine systematically the whole Priestly vocabulary of the Pentateuch in order to establish whether the two above examples (*'edah* and *shesh*) are simply sporadic and meaningless archaisms, or whether they are representative of the language of P as a whole. If the linguistic investigation should prove that the terminology and phraseology of the characteristically exilic and post-exilic literature did not leave their mark on P, i. e. that P definitely lacks any discernible linguistic imprints which would justify its ascription to the late period, we would have to conclude that even the present form of P – and not only (some of) the material embedded in it – is substantially pre-exilic.

As is well known, this was the conclusion which the Israeli scholar Yehezkel Kaufman reached decades ago, mainly on literary-historical grounds.<sup>3</sup> Recently this conclusion has been advocated by Y.M. Grintz; see especially his articles "Thou Shalt not Eat [any thing] with the Blood" and "The Covenant of the Gibeonites" which add historical and sociological arguments to those of Kaufman and fix an even earlier date.<sup>4</sup> [More about these articles in one of the next issues.] Finally, the work of J. Milgrom<sup>5</sup> should be mentioned, where a study of ritual terms common in the Priestly source suggests similar conclusions. It remains to be seen whether the linguistic analysis demonstrated above may or may not support these views.

Summary by the author

<sup>2</sup> *Harvard Theological Review*, 60, 1967, pp. 117-121.

<sup>3</sup> Yehezkel Kaufman, *Toledot Ha'Emuna Halsraelit*, vol. 1, bk. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Y. M. Grintz, *Motz'e Hadoróth*, 1969, pp.

<sup>5</sup> J. Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology*, vol. 1, 1970.