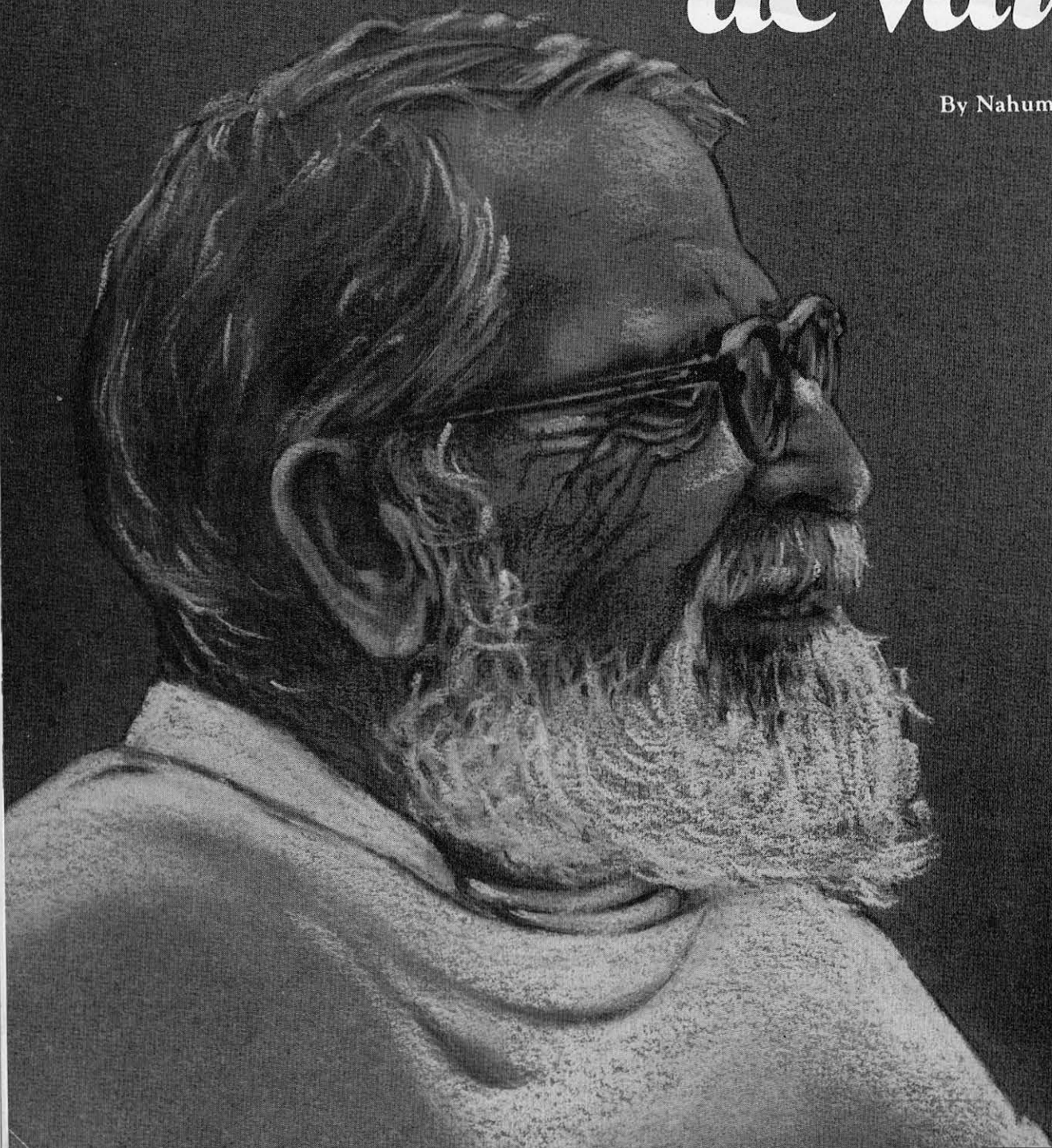


# The Last Legacy of Roland de Vaux

By Nahum M. Sarna



**T**O ENGLISH-SPEAKING READERS, the late French scholar Roland de Vaux, is known mainly as the author of *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*,<sup>1</sup> that massive, erudite, skillfully synthesized, and panoramic treatment of the various forms through which the social, political and religious life of the people of Israel found expression in Biblical times. This standard reference work could only have been written by someone who was at once an accomplished historian of the ancient Near Eastern world, a creative Biblical exegete and a practiced archaeologist. De Vaux was all three. And his long association with the Dominican Ecole Biblique et Archaeologique Francaise in Jerusalem gave him the opportunity to sharpen his skills and deepen his knowledge through a first-hand and intimate familiarity with the lands of the Bible. He edited the prestigious scholarly journal *Revue Biblique* for fifteen fruitful years; he was editor-in-chief of the celebrated *Jerusalem Bible* and editor-in-chief of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*, the series in which the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran are being published. Indeed it was de Vaux himself who excavated Qumran and identified the site with the center of the Essene sect as described by the Roman natural historian, Pliny (23-79 A.D.).

The logical summation of such a career would, of course, be the production of a comprehensive and detailed history of Israel. And indeed de Vaux planned such a history which was to be an ambitious three-volume work that would tell the story from the beginning through the campaign of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.

The first volume of this history, which closes with the occupation of Canaan, appeared in French in 1971, but by that time the author was no longer alive. He died in September 1971 at the age of 68, still at the peak of his powers. His literary effects included a number of chapters in various stages of completion from the second volume, dealing with the period of

the Judges. These chapters were published as volume II in French in 1973.

Now, a one-volume English translation of both French volumes of de Vaux's *The Early History of Israel* (Westminster Press, 1978) has been published in this country. It is not difficult to predict that for a long time to come this mosaic 886-page history will occupy an honored place among the indispensable works of Biblical scholarship, alongside the histories of John Bright<sup>2</sup> and Martin Noth.<sup>3</sup>

An assessment of de Vaux's contributions to scholarship appeared in this journal some time ago, together with his study on the theory of an Israelite amphictyony,<sup>4</sup> so his methodology and many of the issues with which he deals are already familiar to readers of *BAR*. Here I propose only to convey something of the encyclopedic nature of his *History* and to draw attention to his most important conclusions, especially those that have a bearing on our understanding of Biblical literature.

The Prologue (pp. 3-152) is a wide-ranging but detailed survey of Israel's geographic, historic, ethnic and cultural environment. Anyone looking for accurate data on the names of the land, its frontiers, its physical geography, climate, human geography and economy, its relationships with the outside world, and the interaction of all these forces will find it all here. We learn, for instance, about the road system and its impact on the history of the land. We also learn that in the first half of the eighth century B.C. the combined population of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel was only about 1,000,000; that a "city" generally occupied only a few acres of land, and comprised only a few thousand inhabitants; that even the two capitals, Jerusalem and Samaria, never numbered more than 30,000 people each. The lack of good natural harbors along the coast, the existence of alternative land routes outside of Israel linking the main centers of commerce, and the dearth of exportable goods, meant that Israel



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could not become a great trading nation. Solomon’s Israel was of course the exception because Solomon was able to turn military and political power to mercantile advantage. The physical geography of the country imposed a degree of natural isolation that ensured that the influence of outside cultures was never deep or lasting.

The second part of de Vaux’s Prologue is perhaps of less direct interest to the student of the Bible because it deals with successive stages of cultural growth in the pre-historic period, starting with the early “pebble culture” at the beginning of the Quaternary period and continuing down to the collapse of Early Bronze Age civilization (3100-2200 B.C.). The Semites apparently first settled in what was to become the land of Israel at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, which coincidentally, was also the time when Egypt tried to exert control over Canaan in order to create a land bridge with Phoenicia for purposes of trade.

De Vaux’s mastery of the vast range of source materials from the Fertile Crescent is particularly evident in his discussion of the peoples of the area, especially the Amorites, Hurrians, Hyksos and Habiru (‘Apiru). He demonstrates that the Hyksos were mostly Semites who originated in Canaan, and that their occupation of Egypt (c. 1750-1550 B.C.) was quite beneficial to that country despite the complaints of Egyptian writers.

He restates the elements of the Habiru problem—were they related ethnically or through their name to the Hebrews?—but with no definitive conclusion. While the evidence from over 200 texts, from all over the Near East and covering an entire millennium, would seem to favor identifying the Habiru as a social class, the information is nevertheless so varied that no coherent picture can be reconstructed.

In dealing with the term Canaan, de Vaux rejects all the common etymological explanations. These in-

clude “lowland,” “red purple” or “merchant.” He also rejects the popular theory that originally Canaan was used to refer to Phoenicia and that it was later extended by stages until it became coterminous with the whole region west of the Jordan. De Vaux contends that the Israelites used the term with the same application it had for the earlier Egyptians who administered the area. The Israelites simply inherited this meaning. He maintains that the northern boundary of the Egyptian province of Canaan lay much farther north than most scholars would place it. According to de Vaux it reached the upper Orontes and extended beyond Mt. Hermon.

In addition to Canaanites, the other principle Biblical term for the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land is Amorite. This term, says de Vaux, is unconnected with the earlier Amorite immigration of c. 2000 B.C. The Biblical use of Amorite is based, according to de Vaux, on the Amurru in Assyrian texts from the time of Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1070 B.C.) and is used as a general appellation for the people of the land of the west. It is thus devoid of ethnic or historical significance.

The last part of the Prologue dealing with Canaan discusses Canaanite religion. Here de Vaux makes a unique contribution. Canaanite religion, he tells us, was shaped by the struggle for survival, by seasonal rainfall and the cyclical return of the orderly phenomena of nature, by the need for fertility of crops and animals. The Israelites had identical needs and confronted these same factors and forces. Nevertheless, they eschewed Canaanite mythology and ritual and produced an entirely different religion. De Vaux observes how extraordinary that all other peoples who entered Canaan soon forgot their own religions and adopted the local cult, while Israel alone resisted despite frequent widespread backsliding (see Hosea and Jeremiah). De Vaux’s unself-conscious acknowledgment of the divine factor in history is

striking; he is able to acknowledge the divine without in any way compromising his scholarly integrity. He freely states that God intervenes in human history and that this is especially true in the case of his “chosen people,” which is why so much that is mysterious occurs in Israel’s history. For de Vaux, Israel’s religion was a counterpoise to the natural centrifugal forces of topography. He notes the contrast between the poverty of the natural resources with which God endowed Israel and the greatness of its spiritual destiny.

The authenticity of the patriarchal traditions has recently become once again a central focus of scholarly concern, and de Vaux devotes a lengthy section to these problems (pp. 161-287). For the first third of the twentieth century, Julius Wellhausen and his iconoclastic school of Biblical criticism, insisting on the historical worthlessness of the Genesis narratives, dominated the scholarship in this area. Then came William Foxwell Albright in the United States and Yehezkel Kaufmann in Israel. Together with their students, they attempted to reverse this judgment. Recently, however, the entire subject has been reopened\* and there has emerged a tendency to move back in the direction of Wellhausen, paradoxically, just at a time when the newly discovered texts from Ebla seem to point in the opposite direction.

Basically, the issues today are the same as they were a century ago. How old are the patriarchal traditions? Do they have historical value? Who preserved and transmitted them? What specific circumstances favored their preservation and transmission? Did the generations of tradents (those who passed on these traditions) believe they must hand them down intact, exactly as received, or did they feel free to elaborate them? If so, in what ways? Finally, when and at

whose hand were the individual traditions transformed into a connected narrative forming a continuous literary product?

Scholars are still deeply divided on these complex issues. De Vaux expresses himself, refreshingly, with great caution. He accepts the consensus that the Biblical text contains four primary layers or strands of literary material, conveniently identified by the letters J, E, D, and P.\*\* But he does not try to force all the material into a single Procrustean bed in order to prove a theory that largely depends on circular evidence. He is content to let the loose ends stick out.

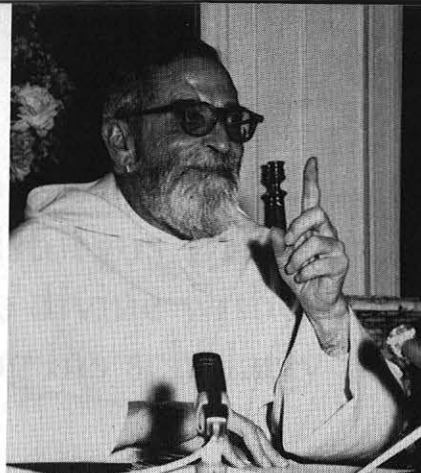
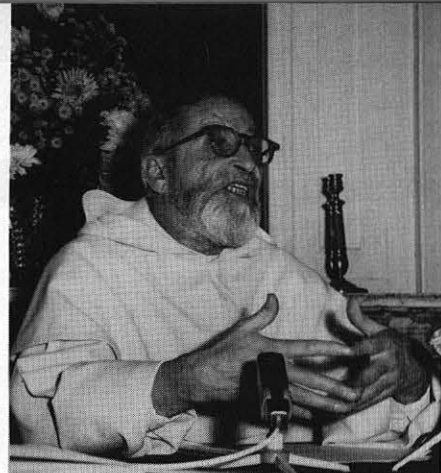
De Vaux believes that the patriarchal traditions could have been preserved and transmitted only at the sanctuaries mentioned in the Bible (such as Shechem, Bethel, Beersheba, Gilgal, Shiloh). At these sanctuaries archives were kept, priests and scribes copied texts, and law and lore was continually read and recited on sacred occasions.

Is it mere coincidence that different cycles of patriarchal stories can be associated with particular areas of the country? Abraham and Isaac are connected mostly with southern Palestine. The Jacob stories, on the other hand, are told primarily against a geographic background either in a district of Transjordan or in central Palestine. According to de Vaux, the Jacob traditions were originally separate from the Abraham and Isaac traditions. At a later period, they were all brought together in a single narrative. Because the southern Palestine connection is common to all three patriarchs (for Jacob too has connections with Beersheba<sup>3</sup>), de Vaux suggests that the fusion of traditions occurred in that region. The tradition concerning the burial of all three patriarchs in the Cave of Machpelah at Hebron in a sense symbolizes the merging of the once separate cycles of stories that orig-

\* See “Abraham in History,” BAR Volume III, Number 4, December 1977.

\*\* These stand for Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), the priestly source (P), and Deuteronomist (D).





inated at separate ancient sanctuaries.

The history of the transmission and redaction (or fusion) of these traditions is a quite different question from their historical value. De Vaux does not attempt to construct a theory or hypothesis to cover all the material. Rather, he examines the evidence bit by bit in light of our present knowledge. He accepts the view that many stories about individual patriarchs are really stories about clans or tribes personified in an eponymous leader. Semi-nomadic groups in ancient times frequently expressed relationships between and among themselves in terms of family genealogies. But, says de Vaux, this collective character "does not in any sense diminish the value of the stories—on the contrary, it makes them more valuable to the historian" (p. 178). At the same time, these stories contain many elements that cannot be explained "collectively"; these elements reflect a distinctively individual character. As de Vaux acutely observes, to deny all historicity to the stories is to assert the extraordinary claim that the Israelites were wholly ignorant of their own origins.

Not surprisingly, de Vaux arrives both at some cautiously conservative views and at some rather radical judgments.

- Although the exact dates of the patriarchal period cannot be established with certainty, the most probable period is the first centuries of the second millennium B.C. Abraham's movement to Canaan is connected with the migration of the Amorites, a largely northwest Semitic people whose most famous king was Hammurabi, and whose presence in Upper Mesopotamia and northern Syria is well attested in the Mari texts. This Amorite background is further attested by Amorite proper names and place-names which occur in these patriarchal narratives but which are never mentioned again anywhere in the Bible.

- The origin of Abraham in Ur and his connections with Haran, says de Vaux, are authentic. The

Ur-kasdim (Ur of the Chaldees) mentioned in the Bible<sup>6</sup> is the city in lower Mesopotamia that Leonard Woolley excavated, although the second element of the name is anachronistic, because it refers to the "Chaldeans" or Arameans who first appear in the twelfth century B.C. Ur flourished in the third millennium B.C., was destroyed a little before 2000 B.C., and enjoyed a prosperous revival from about 2000 to 1800 B.C. Two natural routes connect Ur with Haran, one along the Tigris and the other along the Euphrates. Both cities were centers of the moon cult. Several names of Abraham's family members have connection with this moon cult including Abraham's brother Terah (compare the Hebrew *yerah* "lunar month," *yareah* "moon"), his wife Sarah (compare the Akkadian *sharratu* "queen" consort of the moon-god Sin), his sister-in-law Milcah (compare Akkadian *malkatu* "princess," daughter of the moon-god Sin) and his grand-nephew Laban ("white one," "full moon").

- The patriarchs were pastoral nomads who lived on the fringes of the settled communities and were in the early stages of sedentarization. They were certainly not merchant princes (Cyrus Gordon) or donkey caravanneers (William Foxwell Albright).

- The numerous analogues that have been adduced by scholars to connect the family practices of the patriarchs with similar practices of cultures reflected in cuneiform archives on such subjects as marriage, concubinage, adoption, birthright, household gods, and patrimony, are of unequal value and are indecisive for dating the patriarchal period.

- The complete absence from Genesis of the name Baal either as a divine or personal name, as opposed to the frequently used El, seems to indicate once again that the patriarchal traditions antedate the middle of the second millennium when Baal became an important figure in Canaanite religion.

- The story of Abraham and the four eastern

kings as recounted in Genesis 14 does not contain historically useful material. The chapter contains a mixture of early and late elements, and should be regarded as a late scholarly composition.\*

De Vaux turns next to the traditions relating to the sojourn in Egypt, the Exodus and Sinai (pp. 291-472); he concludes that the traditions regarding Joseph, his descent into Egypt and his rise to power must have an authentic historical basis. De Vaux cites several examples of Semites reaching high governmental office in Egypt, and he demonstrates how the titles they held and their activities, privileges and status, together bear a striking resemblance to what is recorded of Joseph in the Bible. He agrees that the geographical data favor the Hyksos period (18th-16th centuries B.C.) as the chronological setting for the Joseph story, and the geographical data cannot be reconciled with the succeeding Eighteenth Egyptian Dynasty (c. 1552-1306 B.C.), but are consistent with geographical data of the Hyksos period. Although its origins were more than 700 years earlier, the story was composed, or at least received its final redaction, during Solomon's reign. Several lines of evidence support this conclusion, including the personal names<sup>7</sup> and the terminology. The implicit approval of Joseph's supposedly innovative land reforms,<sup>8</sup> and the superb literary sophistication of the narrative also point to Solomon's reign as the time of composition or final redaction. Israel was then at the height of its imperial expansion and its cultural sophistication—factors consistent with a Solomonic date for the final forms of the Joseph story.

De Vaux believes that the Biblical narrative of the descent into and exodus from Egypt simplifies a high-

ly complex situation. The reality was not one long continuous sojourn involving all the tribes, but several descents at various times by different tribes or groups. This process stretched over a considerable period of time.

De Vaux concludes that the traditions about the oppression in Egypt are very ancient. He cites several Egyptian texts which illustrate the employment of serfs for construction work and brickmaking. That one of the garrison cities which the Israelites built is called Ramesses (Exodus 1:11) proves for de Vaux that Ramses II (c. 1290-1224), who is known to have been a great builder, must have been the Pharaoh of the oppression. The name of that city disappeared before the end of the Twentieth Dynasty (c. 1185-1069) so that its survival in the Exodus text must preserve an authentically ancient tradition.

The story of Moses' Midianite wife<sup>9</sup> has to be authentic in light of the hostility towards Midian reflected in later Scriptural texts.<sup>10</sup> The later invention of a Midianite wife for Moses would be inexplicable.

The famous "Kenite hypothesis," according to which Israel derived its knowledge of YHWH (Yahweh) from the Kenites, a semi-nomadic tribe of smiths, is rejected if only for the very obvious reason that there exists no evidence at all for a YHWH cult among them. De Vaux's discussion of the divine name, its origin and explanation, (pp. 338-357) is the most comprehensive and detailed I have seen anywhere. Almost every theory ever advanced about the origins and meaning of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) is examined and dismissed in turn. The author's suggested meaning is "He is," that is, "The Only Existing One." De Vaux finds no clear-cut evidence for the use of this divine name outside Israel prior to Moses.

De Vaux detects two basic themes in the Exodus stories. He distinguishes between the expulsion of the

\* Of course de Vaux wrote before the discovery of the Ebla archive; on the possible effect of the Ebla materials on the authenticity of Genesis 14, see BAR March/April 1979, pages 44-47. But see "Ebla Evidence Evaporates," BAR November/December 1979, p. 52.