

## DAVID'S NUMBERING OF THE PEOPLE – THE POLITICS OF THE SITUATION.

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You read in the Hebrew Scriptures of a man who had thirty sons, all of whom 'rode on white asses';<sup>1</sup> the riding on white asses is a circumstance that expresses their high rank or distinction – that all were princes. In Syria, as in Greece and almost everywhere, white was the regal symbolic colour.\* And any mode of equitation, from the far inferior wealth of ancient times, implied wealth. Mules or asses, besides that they were so far superior a race in Syria no less than in Persia, to furnish a favourite designation for a warlike hero, could much more conveniently be used on the wretched roads, as yet found everywhere, until the Romans began to treat road-making as a regular business of military pioneering. In this case, therefore, there were thirty sons of one man, and all provided with princely establishments. Consequently, to have thirty sons at all was somewhat surprising, and possible only in a land of polygamy; but to keep none back in obscurity (as was done in cases where the funds of the family would not allow of giving to each his separate establishment) argued a condition of unusual opulence. That it was surprising is very true. But as therefore involving any argument against its truth, the writer would justly deny by pleading – for that very reason, *because* it was surprising, did I tell the story. In a train of 1,500 years naturally there must happen many wonderful things, both as to events and persons. Were these crowded together in time or locally, these indeed we should incredulously reject. But when we understand the vast remoteness from each other in time or in place, we freely admit the tendency lies the other way; the wonder would be if there were not many coincidences that each for itself separately might be looked upon as strange. And as the surgeon had set himself to collect certain cases for the very reason that they were so unaccountably fatal, with a purpose therefore of including all that did not terminate fatally, so we should remember that generally historians (although less so if a Jewish historian, because he had

\* Even in Rome, where the purple (whatever colour that might have been) is usually imagined to be the symbol of regal state – and afterwards their improved arts of dyeing, and improved materials, became so splendid that it was made so – white had always been the colour of a monarchy.

a far nobler chain of wonders to record) do not feel themselves open to the objection of romancing if they report something out of the ordinary track, since exactly that sort of matter is their object and it cannot but be found in a considerable proportion when their course travels over a vast range of successive generations. It would be a marvellous thing indeed if every one of five hundred men whom an author had chosen to record biographically should have for his baptismal name – Francis. But if you found that this was the very reason for his admitting the man into his series, that however strange a reason, it had in fact governed him in selecting his subjects, you would no longer see anything to startle your belief.

But let me give an interesting case partly illustrating this principle. Once I was present on an occasion where, of two young men, one very young and very clever was suggesting infidel scruples, and the other, so much older as to be entering on a professional career with considerable distinction, was on the very point of drinking-in all that his companion urged as so much weighty objection that could not be answered. The younger man (in fact, a boy) had just used a passage from the Bible, in which one of the circumstances was – that the Jewish army consisted of 120,000 men.<sup>2</sup> 'Now,' said he, 'knowing as we all do the enormity of such a force as a peace establishment, even for mighty empires like England, how perfectly like a fairy-tale or an Arabian Nights' entertainment does it sound to hear of such monstrous armaments in a little country like Judaea, equal, perhaps, to the twelve counties of Wales!' This was addressed to myself, and I could see by the whole expression of the young physician that his condition was exactly this – his studies had been purely professional; he made himself a king, because (having happened to hurt his leg) he wore white *fasciae*<sup>3</sup> about his thigh. He knew little or nothing of Scriptural records; he had not read at all upon this subject; quite as little had he thought, and, unfortunately, his conversation had lain amongst clever chemists and naturalists, who had a prejudgment in the case that all the ability and free power of mind ran into the channel of scepticism; that only people situated as most women are should acquiesce in the faith or politics of their fathers or predecessors, or could believe much of the Scriptures, except those who were slow to examine for themselves; but that multitudes pretended to believe upon some interested motive. This was precisely the situation of the young physician himself – he listened with manifest interest, checked himself when going to speak; he knew the danger of being reputed an infidel, and he had no temper for martyrdom, as his whole gesture and manner, by its tendency, showed what was passing in his mind. 'Yes, X is right, manifestly right, and every rational view from our modern standard of good sense and reflective political economy tends to the same conclusion. By the reflex light of political economy we know even at this hour much as to the condition of ancient lands like Palestine, Athens, etc., quite unrevealed to the wisest men amongst them. But for me, who am entering on a critical walk of social life, I shall need every aid from advantageous impression in favour of

my religious belief, so I cannot in prudence speak, for I shall speak too warmly, and I forbear.'

What I replied, and in that instance usefully replied – for it sufficed to check one who was gravitating downwards to infidelity, and likely to settle there for ever if he once reached that point – was in substance this:

Firstly, that the plea, with regard to the numbers as most extraordinary, was so far from affecting the credibility of the statement disadvantageously, that on that ground, agreeably to the logic I have so scantily expounded, this very feature in the case was what partly engaged the notice of the Scriptural writer. It was a great army for so little a nation. And *therefore*, would the writer say, *therefore* in print I record it.

Secondly, that we must not, however, be misled by the narrow limits, the Welsh limits, to suppose a Welsh population. For that whilst the twelve counties of Wales do not now yield above half-a-million of people, Palestine had pretty certainly a number fluctuating between four and six millions.

Thirdly, that the great consideration of this was the stage in the expansion of society at which the Hebrew nation then stood, and the sublime interest – sublime enough to them, though far from comprehending the solemn freight of hopes confided to themselves – which they consciously defended. It was an age in which no pay was given to the soldier. Now, when the soldier constitutes a separate profession, with the regular pay he undertakes the regular danger and hardships. There is no motive for giving the pay and the rations but precisely that he *does* so undertake. But when no pay at all is allowed out of any common fund, it will never be endured by the justice of the whole society or by an individual member that he, the individual, as one insulated stake-holder, having no greater interest embarked than others, should undertake the danger or the labour of warfare for the whole. And two inferences arise upon having armies so immense:

First, that they were a militia, or more properly not even that, but a Landwehr<sup>4</sup> – that is, a *posse comitatus*, the whole martial strength of the people (one in four), drawn out and slightly trained to meet a danger, which in those times was always a passing cloud. Regular and successive campaigns were unknown; the enemy, whoever he might be, could as little support a regular army as the people of Palestine. Consequently, all these enemies would have to disperse hastily to their reaping and mowing, just as we may observe the Jews do under Joshua.<sup>5</sup> It required, therefore, no long absence from home. It was but a march, but a waiting for opportunity, watching for a favourable day – sunshine or cloud, the rising or subsiding of a river, the wind in the enemy's face, or an ambush skilfully posted. All was then ready; the signal was given, a great battle ensued, and by sunset of one anxious day all was over in one way or another. Upon this position of circumstances there was neither any fair dispensation from personal service (except where citizens' scruples interfered), nor any motive for wishing it. On the contrary, by a very few days' service, a stigma, not for the individual only, but for his house and kin, would be evaded

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for ages of having treacherously forsaken the commonwealth in agony. And the preference for a fighting station would be too eager instead of too backward. It would become often requisite to do what it is evident the Jews in reality did – to make successive sifting and winnowing from the service troops, at every stage throwing out upon severer principles of examination those who seemed least able to face a trying crisis, whilst honourable posts of no great dependency would be assigned to those rejected, as modes of soothing their offended pride. This in the case of a great danger; but in the case of an ordinary danger there is no doubt that many vicarious arrangements would exist by way of evading so injurious a movement as that of the whole fighting population. Either the ordinary watch and ward, in that section which happened to be locally threatened – as, for instance, by invasion on one side from Edom or Moab, on another side from the Canaanites or Philistines<sup>6</sup> – would undertake the case as one which had fallen to them by allotment of Providence; or that section whose service happened to be due for the month, without local regards, would face the exigency. But in any great national danger, under that stage of society which the Jews had reached between Moses and David – that stage when fighting is no separate professional duty, that stage when such things are announced by there being no military pay – not the army which is so large as 120,000 men, but the army which is so small, requires to be explained.

Secondly, the other inference from the phenomenon of no military pay, and therefore no separate fighting profession, is this – that foreign war, war of aggression, war for booty, war for martial glory, is quite unknown. Now, all rules of political economy, applied to the maintenance of armies, must of course contemplate a regular trade of war pursued with those objects, and not a domestic war for beating off an attack upon hearths and altars. Such a war only, be it observed, could be lawfully entertained by the Jewish people. Mahomet, when he stole all his great ideas from the Mosaic and Christian revelations, found it inevitable to add one principle unknown to either: this was a religious motive for perpetual war of aggression, and such a principle he discovered in the imaginary duty of summary proselytism. No instruction was required. It was sufficient for the convert that, with or without sincerity, under terror of a sword at his throat, he spoke the words aloud which disowned all other faith than in Allah and Mahomet his prophet. It was sufficient for the soldier that he heard of a nation denying or ignoring Mahomet, to justify any atrocity of invasive warfare. But the Jews had no such commission – a proselyte needed more evidences of assent than simply to bawl out a short formula of words, and he who refused to become a proselyte was no object of persecution. Some nations have forced their languages upon others as badges of servitude. But the Romans were so far from treating their language in this way, that they compelled barbarous nations on their frontier to pay for a license to use the Latin tongue. And with much more reason did the Jews, instead of wishing to obtrude their sublime religion upon foreigners,

expect that all who valued it should manifest their value by coming to Jerusalem, by seeking instruction from the doctors of the law, and by worshipping in the outer court of the Temple.

Such was the prodigious state of separation from a Mahometan principle of fanatical proselytism in which the Jews were placed from the very first. One small district only was to be cleared of its ancient idolatrous, and probably desperately demoralized, tribes. Even this purification it was not intended should be instant; and upon the following reason, partly unveiled by God and partly left to an integration, viz., that in the case of so sudden a desolation the wild beasts and noxious serpents would have encroached too much on the human population. So much is expressed, and probably the sequel foreseen was, that the Jews would have lapsed into a wild hunting race, and have outworn that ceremonial propensity which fitted them for a civil life, which formed them into a hive in which the great work of God in Shiloh,<sup>7</sup> His probationary Temple or His glorious Temple and service at Jerusalem, operated as the mysterious instinct of a queen bee, to compress and organize the whole society into a cohesion like this of life. Here, perhaps, lay the reason for not allowing of any sudden summary extirpation, even for the idolatrous tribes; whilst, upon a second principle, it was never meant that this extirpation should be complete. Snares and temptations were not to be too thickly sown – in that case the restless Jew would be too severely tried; but neither were they to be utterly withdrawn – in that case his faith would undergo no probation. Even upon this small domestic scale, therefore, it appears that aggressive warfare was limited both for interest and for time. First, it was not to be too complete; second, even for this incompleteness it was not to be concentrated within a short time. It was both to be narrow and to be gradual. By very necessity, therefore, of its original appointment this part of the national economy, this small system of aggressive warfare, could not provide a reason for a military profession. But all other wars of aggression, wars operating upon foreign objects, had no allowance, no motive, no colourable plea; for the attacks upon Edom, Midian, Moab,<sup>7</sup> were mere acts of retaliation, and, strictly speaking, not aggressive at all, but parts of defensive warfare. Consequently there remained no permanent case of war under Divine allowance that could ever justify the establishment of a military caste; for the civil wars of the Jews either grew out of some one intolerable crime taken up, adopted, and wickedly defended by a whole tribe (as in the case of that horrible atrocity committed by a few Benjamites,<sup>9</sup> and then adopted by the whole tribe), in which case a bloody exterminating war under God's sanction succeeded and rapidly drew to a close, or else grew out of the ruinous schism between the ten tribes and the two seated in or about Jerusalem. And as this schism had no countenance from God, still less could the wars which followed it. So that what belligerent state remains that could have been contemplated or provided for in the original Mosaic theory of their constitution? Clearly none at all, except the one sole case of a foreign invasion. But as this, if in any national

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strength, struck at the very existence of the people, and at their holy citadel in Shiloh or in Jerusalem, it called out the whole military strength to the last man of the Hebrew people. Consequently in any case, when the armies could tend at all to great numerical amount, they must tend to an excessive amount. And, so far from being a difficult problem to solve in the 120,000 men, the true difficulty would lie the other way, to account for its being so much reduced.

It seems to me highly probable that the offence of David in numbering the people,<sup>10</sup> which ultimately was the occasion of fixing the site for the Temple of Jerusalem, pointed to this remarkable military position of the Jewish people – a position forbidding all fixed military institutions, and which yet David was probably contemplating in that very *census*. Simply to number the people could not have been a crime, nor could it be any desideratum for David; because we are too often told of the muster rolls for the whole nation, and for each particular tribe, to feel any room for doubt that the reports on this point were constantly corrected, brought under review of the governing elders, councils, judges, princes, or king, according to the historical circumstances, so that the need and the criminality of such a *census* would vanish at the same moment. But this was not the *census* ordered by David. He wanted a more specific return, probably of the particular wealth and nature of the employment pursued by each individual family, so that upon this return he might ground a permanent military organization for the people; and such an organization would have thoroughly revolutionized the character of the population, as well as drawn them into foreign wars and alliances.

It is painful to think that many amiable and really candid minds in search of truth are laid hold of by some plausible argument, as in this case the young physician, by a topic of political economy, when a local examination of the argument would altogether change its bearing. This argument, popularly enforced, seemed to imply the impossibility of supporting a large force when there were no public funds but such as ran towards the support of the Levites and the majestic service of the altar. But the confusion arises from the double sense of the word 'army,' as a machine ordinarily disposable for all foreign objects indifferently, and one which in Judaea exclusively could be applied only to such a service as must in its own nature be sudden, brief, and always tending to a decisive catastrophe.

And that this was the true form of the crime, not only circumstances lead me to suspect, but especially the remarkable demur of Joab,<sup>11</sup> who in his respectful remonstrance said in effect that, when the whole strength of the nation was known in sum – meaning from the ordinary state returns – what need was there to search more inquisitively into the special details? Where all were ready to fight cheerfully, why seek for separate *minutiae* as to each particular class? Those general returns had regard only to the ordinary *causa belli* – a hostile invasion. And, then, all nations alike, rude or refined, have gone upon the same general outline of computation – that, subtracting the females from

the males, this, in a gross general way, would always bisect the total return of the population. And, then, to make a second bisection of the male half would subtract one quarter from the entire people as too young or too old, or otherwise as too infirm for warlike labours, leaving precisely one quarter of the nation – every fourth head – as available for war. This process for David's case would have yielded perhaps about 1,100,000 fighting men throughout Palestine. But this unwieldy *pospolite*<sup>12</sup> was far from meeting David's secret anxieties. He had remarked the fickle and insurrectionary state of the people. Even against himself how easy had it been found to organize a sudden rebellion,<sup>13</sup> and to conceal it so prosperously that he and his whole court saved themselves from capture only by a few hours' start of the enemy, and through the enemy's want of cavalry. This danger meantime having vanished, it might be profitable that for David personally no other great conspiracy should disturb his seat upon the throne. None of David's sons approached to Absalom in popularity; and yet the subsequent attempt of Adonijah<sup>14</sup> showed that the revolutionary temper was still awake in that quarter. But what David feared, in a further-looking spirit, was the tenure by which his immediate descendants would maintain their title. The danger was this: over and above the want of any principle for regulating the succession, and this want operating in a state of things far less determined than amongst monogamous nations – one son pleading his priority of birth, another, perhaps, his mother's higher rank, a third pleading his very juniority, inasmuch as this brought him within the description of *porphyrogeniture*, or royal birth, which is often felt as transcendent as *primogeniture* – even the people, apart from the several pretenders to the throne, would create separate interests as grounds for insurrection or for intestine feuds. There seems good reason to think that already the ten tribes, Israel as opposed to Judah, looked upon the more favoured and royal tribe of Judah, with their supplementary section of Benjamin, as unduly favoured in the national economy. Secretly there is little doubt that they murmured even against God for ranking this powerful tribe as the prerogative tribe. The jealousy had evidently risen to a great height; it was suppressed by the vigilant and strong government of Solomon; but at the outset of his son's reign it exploded at once, and the Scriptural account of the case shows that it proceeded upon old grievances. The boyish rashness of Rehoboam might exasperate the leaders, and precipitate the issue; but very clearly all had been prepared for a revolt. And I would remark that by the 'young men' of Rehoboam<sup>15</sup> are undoubtedly meant the soldiers – the body-guards whom the Jewish kings now retained as an element of royal pomp. This is the invariable use of the term in the East. Even in Josephus<sup>16</sup> the term for the military by profession is generally 'the young men'; whilst 'the elders' mean the councillors of state. David saw enough of the popular spirit to be satisfied that there was no political reliance on the permanence of the dynasty; and even at home there was an internal source of weakness. The tribe of Benjamin were mortified and incensed at the deposition of Saul's family and the bloody pro-

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scription of that family adopted by David. One only, a grandson of Saul, he had spared out of love to his friend Jonathan. This was Mephibosheth;<sup>17</sup> but he was incapacitated for the throne by lameness. And how deep the resentment was amongst the Benjamites is evident from the insulting advantage taken of his despondency in the day of distress by Shimei.<sup>18</sup> For Shimei had no motive for the act of coming to the roadside and cursing the king beyond his attachment to the house of Saul. Humanly speaking, David's prospect of propagating his own dynasty was but small. On the other hand, God had promised him His support. And hence it was that his crime arose, viz., upon his infidelity, in seeking to secure the throne by a mere human arrangement in the first place; secondly, by such an arrangement as must disorganize the existing theocratic system of the Jewish people. Upon this crime followed his chastisement in a sudden pestilence. And it is remarkable in how significant a manner God manifested the nature of the trespass, and the particular course through which He had meant originally, and *did* still mean, to counteract the worst issue of David's apprehensions. It happened that the angel of the pestilence halted at the threshing-floor of Araunah;<sup>19</sup> and precisely that spot did God by dreams to David indicate as the site of the glorious Temple. Thus it seemed as though in so many words God had declared: 'Now that all is over, your crime and its punishment, understand that your fears were vain. I will continue the throne in your house longer than your anxieties can personally pursue its descent. And with regard to the terrors from Israel, although this event of a great schism is inevitable and essential to My councils, yet I will not allow it to operate for the extinction of your house. And that very Temple, in that very place where My angel was commissioned to pause, shall be one great means and one great pledge to you of My decree in favour of your posterity. For this house, as a common sanctuary to all Jewish blood, shall create a perpetual interest in behalf of Judah amongst the other tribes, even when making war upon Jerusalem.' Witness if it were but that one case where 200,000 captives of Judah were restored without ransom, were clothed completely, were fed, by the very men who had just massacred their fighting relatives.