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Wellhausen and Robertson Smith as Sociologists of early Arabia and ancient Israel

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‘Your book will long be influential’. With these words in a letter to his friend William Robertson Smith of 2 September 1885 Julius Wellhausen praised Smith’s book *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, whose proofs he had received.¹ ‘In my opinion’, continued Wellhausen, ‘it is by far the best thing you have done. Naturally you could work on this material for ever. The harvest is great’. Wellhausen could scarcely know how this prophecy would be fulfilled and although, as we shall see, Wellhausen became increasingly critical of *Kinship and Marriage*, Smith’s book had considerable influence on later British social anthropology. When the doyen of British social anthropology Edward Evans-Pritchard conducted his field work in the 1930s in Libya and the Sudan, Smith’s book, as Evans-Pritchard later told his colleagues and students, played an important role.² In particular, Evans-Pritchard developed from *Kinship and Marriage* a theory of segmentation, although Smith did not use this term himself, and Evans-Pritchard’s classical book *The Nuer* (1940) has been described as ‘the most thorough ethnographic application of segmentary theory’.³ The fact that Smith’s book became so influential is remarkable, given that Smith’s belief that Matriarchy and Totemism had once existed universally among the Semites is not only regarded as completely wrong today, but was not widely accepted in the nineteenth century either, and certainly not by Wellhausen. But, as I shall point out later, Robertson Smith recognised the importance of trying to identify the mechanisms that had shaped societies, and he therefore rightly received recognition for being a pioneer in this area of

¹ A revised version of a lecture given in German at the Wellhausen Congress, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena in November 2006. I am grateful to my niece Ellie Fulford for assistance in preparing this English version. Wellhausen’s letters to Smith are in the Cambridge University Library, ADD 7449. The English translations are my own.

² See P. Dresch, ‘Segmentation: Its Roots in Arabia and its Flowering Elsewhere’, *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1988) S. 50–67. Evans-Pritchard mentioned Smith’s *Kinship and Marriage* in ‘The Nuer: Tribe and Clan (Part 3)’, *Sudan Notes and Records* 18 (1935), 37–87.

³ D. F. Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia. An Anthropological Approach* (New Jersey, 1998; 3rd edn), 133.

social anthropology. There is also an interesting German connection because Smith based his view of early Arabian social organisation on the genealogical tables of the Göttingen Arabist and pupil of Heinrich Ewald, Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, who was also a colleague of Wellhausen.

Wellhausen not only praised Smith's book *Kinship and Marriage*. When agreeing to look through the proofs, he admitted in a letter dated 26 August that 'I have never before read the Arabic texts from this particular standpoint' and he continued, 'I'm not sure that I shall be able to be much help'. In the event, from this time onwards Wellhausen did read the Arabic texts from this viewpoint, he found much of value in the approach, and in the second edition of his book *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* he criticised and corrected some of what Smith had written.

Before I discuss this, I want to point out that already in his dissertation of 1870 Wellhausen had used contemporary accounts of life in Arabia in order to explain Old Testament genealogies. Wellhausen's *De gentibus et familiis judaeis quae 1. Chr. 2.4 enumerantur* concerned itself with the genealogy of the family of Judah in 1 Chronicles 2:4–41. In his discussion, Wellhausen expressed the opinion that although the genealogy depended on traditions from pre-exilic times, the genealogy in its present form was written after the exile. This conclusion was later used in his *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* to support the thesis first proposed by de Wette in 1806 that the books of Chronicles were written after the exile.⁴ The interesting point for our purposes is that Wellhausen's treatment of the Old Testament texts was influenced by examples from contemporary Arabia. On page 24, there is a long quotation from W. G. Palgrave's *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia 1862–1863*

Arab nationality is and always has been based on the division of families and clans. These clans were soon, by the nature of the land itself, divided each and every one into two branches, co-relative indeed, but of unequal size or importance. The greater section remained as townsmen or peasants in the districts best susceptible of culture and permanent occupation, where they still kept up much of their original clannish denominations and forms, though often blended and even at times obliterated by the fusion inseparable from civil and social organisation. The other and lesser portion devoted themselves to a pastoral life. They too retained their original clannish and family

⁴ J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (Berlin, 1927⁶), 212–14

demarcations, but unsoftened by civilisation and unblended by the links of close-drawn society; so that in this point they have continued to be the faithful depositories of primeval Arab tradition and constitute a sort of standard rule for the whole nation. Hence when genealogical doubts and questions of descent arise, as they often do among the fixed inhabitants, recourse is often had to the neighbouring Bedouins for a decision unattainable in the complicated records of town life.⁵

This example, according to which Arabic families were divided into two parts, was used by Wellhausen to explain the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 2. Of the two sons of Hezron, Jerachmeel and Caleb, Jerachmeel corresponded to the people who lived as city dwellers, with Caleb corresponding to the pastoralists. This means that already as a young man, Wellhausen had taken examples from contemporary Arabia in order to explain the sociology and history of ancient Israel. His later 'going over from the Old Testament to the Arabs' (Uebergang vom Alten Testament zu den Arabern) as he famously described this step in 1882 at the beginning of his translation of al-Wākidī's *Kitab alMaghazi* (the book of the raids of the Prophet Muhammad), was not without precedent. His continuation 'I have no doubt that the original organisation with which the Hebrews entered history can be illuminated through a comparison with Arabian antiquity' corresponded to the opinion that he had expressed in his dissertation twelve years earlier.⁶ It is also possible to note in the dissertation the conviction which later became central to Wellhausen's view of the origins of Islam in Medina. This was that the combination of the circumscribed conditions of life in the city and the consciousness of once having been a nomadic people resulted in Medina in the chaos of never-ending blood feuds that Muhammad was able to bring to an end by his view of the teaching of Allah.⁷

I now come to discuss Wellhausen's disagreements with Smith's *Kinship and Marriage* in the two editions of his *Reste Arabischen Heidentums*. In the first edition, Smith was quoted at least fifteen times almost always positively. Only in one particular was Wellhausen unable to agree with his friend, and this was in connection with Smith's belief that Totemism was once practised by the Arabs, and that the names of Arabian tribes were animal names, the subject

⁵ J. Wellhausen, *De gentibus et familiis judaeis quae 1. Chr. 2.4. enumerantur*, (Göttingen, 1870), 24, quoting W. G. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia 1862–1863*, I (London, 1866)², 35.

⁶ J. Wellhausen, *Muhammed in Medina. Das ist Wakidi's Kitab alMaghazi in verkürzter deutscher Wiedergabe herausgegeben* (Berlin, 1882), 5.

⁷ J. Wellhausen, *Das Arabische Reich und sein Sturz* (Berlin, 1902), 4.

of chapter 7 of *Kinship and Marriage*. 'W. R. Smith has tried to prove that among the Arabs the so called Totemism once existed', wrote Wellhausen, 'the custom known particularly from the Indians that a tribe believes a wolf to be its divine ancestor, calls itself wolf and sees all wolves as their blood relatives. However I agree with Nöldeke that he has not succeeded in proving this.'⁸ Arab tribal names are names of individuals and applied from individuals to the tribes. There are some animal names among them. . . but these are incidental, and do not amount to a consistent system'.⁹ If Wellhausen could not accept Smith's theory of Totemism, he believed that Smith had given the correct explanation for the origin and importance of female deities. The dualism of male and female gods had nothing to do with the processes of conception and birth. 'Gods and goddesses stand next to each other, self contained and quite unrelated. They never constitute a pair, as W. R. Smith has correctly emphasised, in particular by pointing out that gods are much older than the institution of marriage'.¹⁰ The importance of goddesses was that they were bound up with the mysterious forces of nature and as a result of this with the idea of authority. Once more, Wellhausen could mention and praise his friend. 'In addition, W. R. Smith has shown convincingly that the terms authority and motherhood lie close together. The mother holds the family together. The ruler of the stars who orders their course is called the mother of the stars, as we have seen. There are therefore two explanations of how divinity can be thought of in female terms'.¹¹

Before I compare the second edition of *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* with the first, I shall, for chronological reasons, mention Wellhausen's article 'Die Ehe bei den Arabern' which he published in 1893 and described as 'a gleanings from the harvest which others, particularly W. R. Smith, have reaped'.¹² In this article, Wellhausen both agreed and disagreed with Smith. In particular, Wellhausen criticised Smith's view that in both ancient Israel and early Arabia, marriage was a custom in which the man became a member of his wife's family, and that the Arabic phrase *bana 'alaiha* (he built a tent over his wife) was equivalent to the Hebrew *ba 'eleiha* (he went in to her), meaning that the marriage tent

⁸ Wellhausen was referring to the long review of *Kinship and Marriage* by Th. Nöldeke in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 40 (1886), 148–87.

⁹ J. Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten. Drittes Heft, Reste Arabischen Heidentumes* (Berlin: Reimer 1887), 176.

¹⁰ *Reste*, 179.

¹¹ *Reste*, 180.

¹² J. Wellhausen, 'Die Ehe bei den Arabern', *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften und der Georg-Augusts (sic) Universität zu Göttingen*, 1893, 431–81.

belonged to the wife and not to the husband.¹³ Smith's point was that the husband going into the wife's domain and not vice versa pointed to an original matriarchy, and he also drew attention to Genesis 2:24 'therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh'. Wellhausen also rejected Smith's attempt to derive so-called Levirate marriage from an original situation of polyandry. Over against Smith's view that there had once been a matriarchal system in Semitic societies,¹⁴ Wellhausen preferred the term 'Metrarchie' and meant by this word not a matriachate, but simply the recognition of the importance of the mother and her relatives in matters of descent.¹⁵

The first edition of *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* appeared in 1887. When Wellhausen published the second edition ten years later, Smith was dead, a fact that Wellhausen commented on with evident sadness in the preface to his book *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte* which was published in 1894. 'A reader on whom I had counted, closed his eyes just as the first pages of my book were being printed. William Robertson Smith was freed from his long and painful sufferings on Saturday 31 March this year'.¹⁶ The death of his friend gave Wellhausen the freedom to criticise Smith's work more severely than perhaps would have been the case if Smith had still been alive. Wellhausen omitted several references to Smith that had been in the first edition, re-wrote others as footnotes, and criticised Smith in other cases. The second edition assumed that it was no longer necessary to refute the Totemism theory and therefore omitted all reference to it. Also the paragraphs about male and female deities was considerably revised and the complimentary references to Smith were omitted.¹⁷ On page 188 footnote 1, Wellhausen remarked that Smith had not correctly understood a narrative about blood feud between the Hodhalites and the Yemenites, and he continued 'W. R. Smith has too quickly drawn the conclusion from this example that its proper application was when a man was found slain; then the people of the place had to swear that they were not the murderers, exactly as in Deuteronomy 21. In fact in Islam, it was the rule that the state paid the blood money for someone whose murderer was unknown and that this came out of the official purse'.¹⁸ Wellhausen was critical not only

¹³ 'Die Ehe', 444 with reference to Smith, *Kinship* (2nd edn), 198–202.

¹⁴ 'Die Ehe', 461.

¹⁵ 'Die Ehe', 474.

¹⁶ J. Wellhausen, *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin: Reimer, 1894), vi.

¹⁷ J. Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen Heidentums Gesammelt und Erläutert* (Berlin, 1897, 2nd edn), 208–9.

¹⁸ *Reste*, 2nd edn, 188–9. See W. R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage*, 2nd edn, 64 note 2.

of *Kinship and Marriage* but also of Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* whose second edition Smith had prepared shortly before his death in 1894. For example, Wellhausen criticised Smith's description of the ceremony in 'Arāfa and Muzdalifa in connection with the pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁹ The issue was whether or not 'Arāfa, a mountain to the east of Mecca was reckoned to be part of the sacred area. Smith argued that it was not. Wellhausen appealed to ancient authorities to show that it was.

Smith had stimulated Wellhausen to think about the sociology of the Arabs even though Wellhausen had already used Arabian examples in his dissertation in order to understand Old Testament genealogies. As soon as he began to concentrate upon these matters, Wellhausen felt himself obliged to criticise and to correct Smith, especially after Smith's death. The basic difference between them was that Wellhausen concentrated upon details while Smith, who was by no means indifferent to details, was trying to give sociological explanations to the material he was studying. The reason for his interest in Totemism was that he saw in it an explanation for the mechanisms that gave social and religious cohesion to exogamous groups. Again, his efforts to demonstrate the existence of a matriarchal system that had preceded the patriarchal system among the Semites were grounded in an attempt to explain things sociologically. There were practices and references in the Old Testament and in the Arabic texts that did not appear to fit the pattern of descent in the male line. Genesis 2:24 has already been mentioned. Given that writers such as J.J. Bachofen, Smith's friend J.F. McLennan and the Dutch scholar G.A. Wilken had argued for the priority of matriarchal systems over patriarchal ones, Smith was not out of line with the intellectual currents of his time.²⁰ Even Nöldeke in his review of *Kinship and Marriage* had admitted that the existence of the matriachate among the Semites at some time in their history could not be doubted.²¹ Smith thus used his brilliant intellect to try to solve the anomalies that he found in the texts by ascribing them to relics of a once all-pervasive matriarchal system among the Semites. He had genuine sociological instincts that were lacking in his great German colleague.

I come now briefly to the matter of the sociology of ancient Israel. Smith wrote very little about the origins of the Israelites, Wellhausen a little more.

¹⁹ *Reste*, 2nd edn, 82; cp. W.R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (Edinburgh: 1894; 2nd edn), 342.

²⁰ J.J. Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Stuttgart 1861); J.F. McLennan in the *Fortnightly Review*, 1870; G.A. Wilken, *Das Matriarchat . . . bei den alten Arabern* (Leipzig, 1884).

²¹ Th. Nöldeke, in *ZDMG*, 40, 149.

What one finds in both is, in my opinion, simplistic in comparison with what they had written about Arabian tribes and genealogies. Consider these quotations from Wellhausen's *Medina vor dem Islam*—

Several families (Sippen) make up a clan (Geschlecht), several clans a group (Gruppe), and several groups form a tribe. Arabic terminology in these matters is in no way precise. The size of the units in the subdivisions varies at each level. There is no measurement and no number that is necessary to define a group or a clan. Fragmentation and filiation can go even further or they can cease. Large clans can divide into smaller parts and then into families. A small clan, on the other hand can constitute a single *Dār* (household) . . .

The genealogy is organised on the principle of kinship, but because there can be disruptions of the kinship principle, which produce new relationships after older ones have been dissolved, the new situations are immediately represented in terms of kinship, because all relationships are expressed in terms of blood relationships. In this way old and new, past and present are united together on one level. . . . Genealogies are therefore as much history as statistic. . . . they cannot be understood without an historical commentary. Unfortunately, that commentary is only very partially available to us.²²

Given the sophistication of his handling of this material Wellhausen's account of Israel's origins is astonishingly meagre. He believed that the people of Israel had been formed from various groups that were found at the oasis of Kadesh. Where did their unity come from? Wellhausen was not entirely clear about this. He spoke of the war camp, of religion, and of the tie of blood, without describing or analysing any social mechanisms in terms of which they might have operated, and which would have made these suggestions meaningful. It may be that he thought that Moses had acted in a similar way to how he understood Muhammad to have acted, and had established a people on the basis of religion and war.²³

²² J. Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten, 4tes Heft. Medina vor dem Islam* (Berlin, 1889), 19, 26–7.

²³ J. Wellhausen, *Geschichte Israels* in idem, *Grundrisse zum Alten Testament* (TB 27) (München, 1965), 18, 'Das Kriegslager war die Wiege der Nation und die wahre Schmiede ihrer Einheit – es war auch das älteste Heiligtum.' Idem, *Israelitisch-jüdische Religion* in *Grundrisse zum AT*, 75, 'Das Volk fühlt sich selber als Blutgemeinschaft, als erweiterte Familie. Es erscheint (nicht immer als Ganzes sondern gewöhnlich nur

Smith's account of Israel's origins was similarly meagre. In *Kinship and Marriage* he described the Hebrews as 'armed hordes of nomads' who had emerged from Arabia.²⁴ Following their conquest of Canaan they had undergone a transition from pastoral to agricultural life and had absorbed a considerable part of the existing population of Canaan.²⁵ What saved them from losing their identity was the fact that Moses had given them a common faith in Jehovah, a faith that had been forged through Israel's wars of occupation, and the conviction that Jehovah was in their midst.²⁶ It was left to the prophets to form this rudimentary faith into the religion of Israel at its best.

For the sake of completeness it must be said that the view of Wellhausen and Robertson Smith that it was possible to utilise descriptions of Arabia in order to reconstruct primitive Semitic religion or the social history of ancient Israel, was incorrect. This view was based upon the assumption that there had once been a Semitic homeland in Arabia from which waves of Semites had from time to time emerged into the surrounding lands, where they came into contact with civilised peoples and interacted with them. Further, there was the view that the Arabic language and Arab peoples living in their desert Semitic homeland had preserved fundamental features of the original Semitic culture. Only so was it possible to use literary sources from the 7th and 8th centuries CE in order to illumine the social organisation of ancient Israel from the 12th century BCE, or genealogies such as that discussed by Wellhausen in his doctoral dissertation.

Already during the lifetime of Robertson Smith and Wellhausen there was a challenge to the idea of an Arabian 'homeland' which had preserved unaltered the elements of primitive Semitic religion. In 1906 the Assyriologist Hugo Winckler criticised the school 'which found its salvation in the Bedouin theory' and he argued that it was necessary to understand the sociology and religion of ancient Israel in the light of the great civilisations of Babylon and Assyria. What existed in the Arab lands before the coming of Islam was not a form of primitive Semitic religion but the degenerated relics of the urban culture of Babylon and Assyria.²⁷ Although the general opinion today

gliedweise) unter mehreren Aspekten: als Kultusgemeinde, als Gerichtsversammlung und als Heer'.

²⁴ *Kinship*, 209.

²⁵ *Kinship*, 252.

²⁶ W.R. Smith, *The Prophets of Israel and their Place in History*, (London, 1897; 2nd edn), 32–5.

²⁷ H. Winckler, *Religionsgeschichte und geschichtlicher Orient* (Leipzig, 1906), 21. See also idem., 'Arabisch-Semitisch-Orientalisch' in *Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatischen Gesellschaft*,

is that the 'pan-Babylonians' went too far in the claims that they made for the importance of ancient Mesopotamia, modern Old Testament scholarship pays much more attention to ancient Assyria and Babylon than it does to ancient Arabia, perhaps wrongly. Researchers such as Werner Caskel, Joseph Henninger, Walter Dostal and Francesco Gabrielli have shown that the history of pre-Islamic Arabia and of nomadism and the Bedouin is far more complex than Wellhausen or Robertson Smith could have imagined.²⁸ The idea of a 'homeland' in the Arabian desert from which the Semites originated, has been abandoned, as well as the idea that Arabic offers direct access to proto-semitic.²⁹

In modern Social Anthropology the point is made that genealogies have little to do with reality and that they should be regarded as 'constructed meanings' which simplify social groupings and processes. The idea that a society is constituted by 'blood' is likewise rejected. Under the heading of 'practical kinship' it is acknowledged that groups and societies are bound together by a whole range of different elements, even if their members depend upon genealogies. The connections can be understood as the working together of political, economic and cultic factors.³⁰ All this indicates that while Robertson Smith and Wellhausen were pioneers in their day, the discipline has moved on considerably since then. However, it is also fair to say that the discipline would not be where it is today without their remarkable pioneering contributions.

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Berlin, VI, 4 (1901), 7f and idem, 'Der alte Orient und die Geschichtsforschung' in *Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatischen Gesellschaft*, Berlin, XI (1906), 50–8.

²⁸ W. Caskel, 'Die Bedeutung der Beduinen in der Geschichte der Araber', *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen*, Heft 8 (Köln und Opladen, 1953); F. Gabrieli (ed.), *L'antica società beduina*, Studi Semitici 2 (Rome, 1959); J. Henninger, *Die Familie bei den heutigen Beduinen Arabiens* in *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, XLII (1943); idem, *Über Lebensraum und Lebensformen der Frühsemiten in Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen*, Heft 151 (Köln und Opladen, 1968); idem, 'Zum frühsemitischen Nomaden' in L. Földes (ed.), *Viehwirtschaft und Hirtenkultur. Ethnographische Studien* (Budapest, 1969), 33–68.

²⁹ C. Rabin, 'The origin of the subdivisions of Semitic' in D. W. Thomas, W. D. McHardy (eds.), *Hebrew and Semitic Studies presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver in celebration of his seventieth birthday, 20 August 1962* (Oxford, 1963), 104–15

³⁰ Eickelman, *The Middle East*, 152