

CHAPTER ONE

Hydraulic Despotisms

A very long time ago, some 2.5 million years B.C., the mother of human species as we know it, our ultimate ancestor, appeared in East Africa. She walked erect and was able to close her thumbs and forefingers to make tools for doing what her limbs were unable to do. She was four feet tall and probably black. This is what the science of paleontology told us during the last four decades of the twentieth century.

The earliest humans were related to primates, the apes and monkeys. Humans and gorillas share 92 percent of their DNA. The genetic conformity between humans and chimpanzees is significantly greater. Humans and chimpanzees share 98 percent of their DNA. It is possible that humans and chimpanzees are descended from the same species of animal long ago extinct. Or that humans evolved out of chimpanzees who gave up swinging from trees in order to find food on the ground. Like chimps, humans tend to migrate in colonies. Gorillas are more individualistic, but they, too, are often found to be migrating and living in small groups.

That humans are a species of primate is indisputable. The earliest humans lived and traveled in small groups. They were hunters and gatherers. They gathered fruits and vegetables growing wild in the then-great forests and savannas of East Africa and they hunted animals that they could kill and eat.

Like most humans today, they were carnivorous, but not entirely so. As long as there were vegetables and fruits in abundance, they were satisfied with a vegetarian diet. But fresh meat, eaten both raw and cooked, appealed to them.

Out of stones and bones, they made weapons to kill animals. Their throats and larynxes could utter sounds that allowed for communica-

tion between these humans, and over time, these sounds were shaped into organized languages.

Frequently on the move in search of food, the humans very slowly drifted northward and moved up the great rivers that flowed together to form the Nile valley. Around a hundred thousand years ago, the humans reached the Nile delta and the Mediterranean Sea and began to spread east and north from there. By this time they had learned to be farmers, to plant seeds, to irrigate their croplands, and to build villages and towns, drawing their sustenance from the cultivated earth. But they did not cease to hunt and gather.

The humans reached Europe—at first, the territory adjacent to the Crimea and the northern shores of the Black Sea—about 10,000 B.C.

Based on their excavations, archaeologists tell us that later, around 6000 B.C., two centers of rich and highly developed civilization had emerged in the Near East—in the northern extremity of Egypt and in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, in what is today southern Iraq.

The availability of irrigation systems to water the land and produce grain and other food crops was the material foundation for these two great river-valley societies, Egypt and Iraq. They were hydraulic despotisms, in which a small ruling class, with the aid of soldiers and priests, commanded the material resources that gave sustenance to these civilizations and allowed them to build cities, palaces, and tombs.

The soldiers made sure that the peasants and laborers did what had to be done to maintain irrigation systems, harvest crops, and erect buildings. The priests assured the masses that this forced-labor system was dictated by the gods, who were represented on earth by kings.

The Nile valley was for the most part a natural irrigation system, in which the great river overflowed once a year, covering the land with rich silt brought from East Africa, but pharaohs, as the Nile kings were called, also built some major canals to improve upon natural irrigation. The Tigris-Euphrates valley was a scene of massive and complicated irrigation systems built by human labor to pull the water inland from the rivers.

We know about these two large and prosperous settlements of Iraq and northern Egypt exclusively from the material records offered by archaeology. It was not until around 3500 B.C. that writing

emerged in both societies. Each developed its own distinctive forms of writing.

For another millennium, these written records consisted entirely of state business-accounts and letters, and panegyrics to the mightiness and divinity of kings. (By the dawn of writing, a half million people were settled in each of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates valleys, where huge temples and palaces were erected for kings, priests, and aristocrats, while the common people lived in small houses made of sun-dried bricks, or in tents.)

The forces for change in the two great societies of Egypt and Iraq were, with one exception, external rather than internal. That one exception was the attempt by Pharaoh Akhenaton (around 1330 B.C.) to create a new monotheistic religion (with similarities to Judaism) and eliminate the power of the traditional priests who served a multitude of deities. This theological revolution was immediately reversed after Akhenaton's death.

Otherwise, what happened in the two river-valley civilizations was determined by wars spurred by invasions from without. In Egypt, dynasties enduring for centuries presided over irrigation and cultivation, huge edifices built by forced labor, and the manufacture of exquisite paintings and jewelry. For a century, around 1100 B.C., Egypt was invaded and ruled by a "sea people," from western Asia, but then effective power returned to a native dynasty.

The history of the ancient Tigris-Euphrates valley was shaped by a series of invasions from the north. As Sumerians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Babylonians succeeded one another, the structure of severely class-ridden societies and agriculture-based economies did not change. The series of invasions and conquests ended around 500 B.C. with Iraq absorbed into the expanding Iranian (Persian) empire to the east.

In the first century B.C., Egypt was absorbed into the expanding Roman empire, and remained its wealthiest province until the Muslim Arabs took it over in the seventh century A.D.

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In both instances the hydraulic despotisms were marked by the tremendous capacity for millennia-long continuities in government, religion, urban environment, social structure, and economy. Life expectancy was short, never rising above forty years of age until well

into the twentieth century A.D. Peasants and urban laborers constituted 95 percent of the population.

Monarchy was considered divine. The priests unequivocally supported the king. Aristocrats derived their wealth from royal largess. Whether they were legally slaves or subject to some other variant of forced labor, the role of peasants and urban workers was to serve the king, priests, and aristocrats until death.

The physical remains of the Iraqi monarchies have survived only in small fragments, the most impressive being huge Assyrian statues and bas-reliefs now found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the British Museum in London. Many of the famous pyramid tombs of the Egyptian rulers have survived, and some are still unexcavated. The higher one was on the social scale while alive, the more likely one was to enjoy a happy afterlife, accompanied by one's prized possessions. The contents of the excavated pyramids can be seen in museums in Cairo, in principal Western European cities, particularly London and Paris, and in Brooklyn, New York. Egyptian craftsmen were highly skilled, especially in the making of colorful murals and gold jewelry. Many Egyptian jewelry designs are still popular today.

No despotism, not even the technocratic monstrosities of the twentieth century A.D., can entirely shut off the human predilection for law, art, and charitable ethics. The Iraqis were prone to compiling law codes, such as that of Hammurabi, which slightly mitigated the harshness of everyday life for the masses. The Iraqis also developed myths about the creation of the world, including a story about a Great Flood, nowadays believed to have actually occurred on the shores of the Black Sea. These writings may have influenced the authors of the Hebrew Bible, who lived in Iraq around 500 B.C.

The Egyptians produced attractive murals of domestic life and idealized depictions of animals, and a host of myths connected to Re, the Sun god.

The only clear expression of intellectual dissent from hydraulic despotism occurred in the southern half of the coastal lands of the eastern Mediterranean, called variously Canaan, Palestine, Israel, Judah, and, today, Israel again. Here and in a satellite Jewish colony in Iraq, between 800 and 500 B.C., visionaries ("the Prophets")—namely Amos, Ezekiel, Isaiah (at least two different writers writing under this

name), and Jeremiah—wrote elegant poems calling for social justice in the world and a freer, more open and humanitarian society.

This Promised Land of the Hebrews was on the main mercantile-and-army route that ran from Egypt to Iraq. It was the place of egalitarian ideas that contradicted the way of life of the two great empires that lay at either end of the road that traversed Israel.

Proponents of a monotheistic theology that resembled that of Pharaoh Akhenaton, and of a strong national consciousness, the Hebrew prophets called for a just and free society sharply at odds with the hydraulic despotisms, even in the severely edited form their writings were given by the priests before these writings were admitted into the slowly developing Hebrew Bible. Some of the works attributed to Isaiah and Ezekiel were composed in Iraq. Jeremiah spent the last years of his life in Egypt, so that there is more than local significance to the radical, democratic, humanitarian visions of the Hebrew prophets.

The text of the Hebrew Bible read in synagogues today was defined in Spain around 1000 A.D., but this version corresponds very closely to a Biblical text written in or near Jerusalem between 300 and 250 B.C. and discovered in the late 1940s in caves overlooking the Dead Sea, south of Jerusalem.

Historians and archaeologists now believe that the Hebrew Bible crystallized around 600 B.C., in the time of King Josiah, who, together with the Judean priests, undertook a religious reformation. A strict monotheism was ordained, local shrines destroyed, and the important religious services centralized in Jerusalem. A stern moral code and a maze of religious laws were imposed. Shortly after, the main part of the Jewish community was exiled by the Babylonians to Iraq, where some Jewish families continued to live in unbroken peace until 1948. After their conquest of Iraq around 500 B.C., the tolerant Persian rulers encouraged the Jews to return to Judea, and perhaps half did so, carrying with them historical myths and ethical ideas from Iraq.

Their scribes settled down to organize and compose the Bible as it has existed since 250 B.C. and later came to be a part of the Christian Old Testament. God's covenant with the Jews, His chosen people and witnesses to His message of love and law for all mankind, became the prime theme of the Hebrew Bible, which now included the heavily edited texts of the Prophets calling for social justice at a time when a

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succession of petty Hebrew kings imitated the hydraulic despotisms in Iraq and Egypt.

A grand national myth was created in which the Hebrews were said to have come originally from Iraq and to have migrated to Canaan and then to Egypt, where they became slaves of the Pharaohs. They were led by Moses into freedom and a return to the Promised Land. Archaeologists after a century of excavation know today that this is only a liberation myth; there was no exodus of the Jews from Egypt, although Passover annually celebrates this event. The rabbis who took over from the Jerusalem priests after the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 A.D. placed another conservatizing layer of editing upon the final text of the Bible, making it a persistent reminder of national consciousness but further downplaying the radical call for social justice against hydraulic despotism, which the Prophets had inculcated between 800 and 500 B.C.

CHAPTER TWO

The Greeks

It was not until 1948 that Cambridge University stopped requiring a knowledge of classical (ancient) Greek as a prerequisite for admission. This requirement was based not only on the intrinsic merits of ancient Greek literature and philosophy. Knowledge of Greek was a screening device to keep out the less affluent, who attended British state schools, where Greek was less likely to be taught than in private schools.

But the nineteenth-century British genuinely fell in love with the Greeks and thought that mastering Greek ideas was the hallmark of a good education. Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol College, Oxford, was regarded as Britain's leading educator of the 1870s and 1880s. His chief claim to fame was translating most of the dialogues of the Athenian philosopher Plato. It was considered imperative that those young men destined to rule the British Empire should be firmly grounded in the thought of Plato and Aristotle, another ancient Athenian philosopher, as well as in Greek epic poetry and drama.

The amazing thing is that from a small population—not more than two hundred thousand people at any time, including farmers in the nearby countryside—arose the dominance of Athens as the intellectual and literary center it was from about 425 to 350 B.C. Another Greek city, Corinth, shared some commercial success with Athens; and Sparta, an oligarchic society organized around an army, shared political and military power in Greece with Athens and finally prevailed in war with the Athenians. But when the Victorian Brits said "Greece," they meant "Athens." There was very little in the way of a cultural heritage handed on from the other Greek cities.

Those of the middle and upper-middle class (there were no landed aristocracy in Athens or thereabouts) could rely on the labor of 35 per-