

THE MEANING OF עַם הָאָרֶץ IN THE OLD TESTAMENT¹

THE late Judge Mayer Sulzberger, of Philadelphia, published in 1910 an essay on 'The Am Ha-Aretz: The Ancient Hebrew Parliament', in which he put forward the theory that עַם הָאָרֶץ in the Old Testament means 'a body of delegates akin to a Parliament' (p. 55), 'a general gathering of delegates, an Am of the land' (p. 58). עַם הָאָרֶץ, Sulzberger says, 'is simply a technical term of Hebrew Politics and signifies what we would call "the Parliament"' (p. 16).

Before my attention was drawn to Sulzberger's publication I came to the conclusion that עַם הָאָרֶץ meant in many passages of the Old Testament 'the leaders of the land', 'the representatives of the people', something like 'Parliament'. Now I venture to suggest that in all the passages, in which עַם הָאָרֶץ occurs, that term means 'the landed gentry, the landowners, the landed aristocracy, the lords of the land, the representatives of the people'.

What is the origin of this term? Sulzberger says: 'The term Am Ha-Aretz has had a chequered career. In its origin it probably meant the people of a foreign land' (p. 15).

I submit that the origin of the term is simply 'the land'. עַם הָאָרֶץ means 'the people of the land', that is, 'the owners of the land'. And 'the owners of the land' were 'the lords of the land', the leaders, the representatives of the people. It seems that עַם הָאָרֶץ had a wider and a narrower meaning. In the wider meaning עַם הָאָרֶץ included all the landed gentry, all the owners of landed estates, in short, the lords of the land. In the narrower meaning עַם הָאָרֶץ signified the representatives of the landed gentry, the house of lords. The fundamental idea is: the people of the land, namely, the people who possess land.

Only the עַם הָאָרֶץ could sell land to Abraham (Gen. ch. xxiii). Joseph controlled the land, and the owners of the land had to buy the corn from him. That is the meaning of Gen. ch. xlii, v. 6 a:

וַיֹּסֶף הוּא הַשְּׁלִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ הוּא הַמְּשִׁבִּיר לְכָל-עַם הָאָרֶץ.

Joseph acquired all the land of the Egyptians, that is, of the Egyptian landowners. Their land passed into the possession of the king (Gen. ch. xlvii, v. 20). And the people, that is, the owners of the land, he transferred to the towns. This is the meaning of the words וְאֶת-הָעָם וְאֶת-הָעָרִים הָעִיר בְּעִיר (v. 21 a). The translation 'And as for the people, he removed them city by city' is not correct. The rendering (based upon an emended text) 'And the people he reduced to bondmen' (see Skinner's Commentary on Genesis, p. 500, and the Commentaries of

¹ The substance of a paper read at the Orientalist Congress at Oxford 1928.

Holzinger, Gunkel, and Driver, also Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*) is to be rejected. The Massoretic text triumphs. The עַם, the עַם הָאָרֶץ, were no more עַם הָאָרֶץ, as they were deprived of their land. They became now town-dwellers. Only the priests did not sell their land (see v. 22). The priests were thus also a part of the עַם הָאָרֶץ.

That עַם הָאָרֶץ in Exod. ch. v, v. 5 means 'the representatives of the people' I endeavoured to shew in a short article in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. xii (1921). עַם הָאָרֶץ has the same meaning in Lev. ch. iv, v. 27. A member of the עַם הָאָרֶץ had to bring a special sacrifice. First the כֹּהֵן is mentioned (ch. iv, v. 3). Then the עֵדָה is referred to in v. 13. (According to Sulzberger the עֵדָה was the High Court of the עַם הָאָרֶץ. The English House of Lords is the highest Court of Appeal; only a small part of the House of Lords sits as a Court of Justice.) Then the נִשְׂאָה, who is the President of the עֵדָה and of the עַם הָאָרֶץ, is mentioned (v. 22). Cohen, Edah, and Nasi were all component parts of the עַם הָאָרֶץ, each having special functions to perform. In v. 27 the general body of the עַם הָאָרֶץ is mentioned. They can all afford to bring animal sacrifices: oxen, goats, and lambs. Ch. v, vv. 1-13, speaks of poor people, who were either what was called עַם הָאָרֶץ, or, perhaps, who did not belong to the עַם הָאָרֶץ, and, therefore, sometimes could not afford even doves, but only fine flour (v. 11).

עַם הָאָרֶץ in Lev. ch. xx, vv. 3 and 4 is probably the executive body of the עַם הָאָרֶץ, the lords of the land as a Court of Justice.

Sometimes the word עַם הָאָרֶץ is omitted and only the word עַם is used. We understand now why Lev. ch. xxi, v. 1 has the words לְנַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יִטְמָא (the priest) 'shall not defile himself for the dead among his עַם', among his fellow-peers. And v. 3 (לֹא יִטְמָא בְעַמּוֹ) receives an excellent meaning. v. 3 is regarded as very difficult. Dillmann, in his Commentary on Leviticus, says: 'v. 4 nicht mehr erklärbar und wohl corrupt'. Bertholet says: 'v. 4 ist in seiner gegenwärtigen Gestalt unverständlich', and suggests the reading of לְבַעַל בְּעַל. See also Baentsch's Commentary and Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*. The verse as it reads in the Massoretic text is now, I suggest, perfectly clear. The priest is a בְּעַל among his עַם, i. e. a lord among his fellow-lords. בְּעַל means 'master', 'lord'. The כֹּהֵן was a lord. 'Lord' is the English equivalent of the Hebrew בְּעַל. בְּעַל in v. 14 and בְּעַמּוֹ in v. 15 have also the more specific meaning. The priest may only marry a daughter of the עַם הָאָרֶץ.

The עַם הָאָרֶץ in 2 Kings, ch. xi, v. 14, vv. 18, 19, and 20 denotes the representatives of the lords, the House of Lords. The lords appointed the sovereign lord, the king. In v. 17 the word עַם הָאָרֶץ is left out. In 2 Kings, ch. xvi, v. 15, the burnt-offering of the whole עַם הָאָרֶץ is mentioned together with the burnt-offering of the king. In 2 Kings, ch. xxi, v. 24, again the עַם הָאָרֶץ are the representative lords. In ch. xxiii,

v. 35 *עם הארץ* are all the lords of the land. Note the words: *אך העריך* *אמתהכסף* *אמתהארץ* לתת *אמתהכסף* 'but he taxed the land to give the silver'. The land-less, the poor people, had no silver and no gold to give. The great men of the *עם הארץ*, the big landowners, were called *אילי הארץ* (ch. xxiv, *v.* 15), and the poorer lords were called *דלת עם הארץ* (*v.* 14). In ch. xxv, *v.* 3 it is said that even the landowners had no bread (*ולא-היה לחם*) (*לעם הארץ*). In *v.* 12 we read of the *דלת הארץ*. Ch. xxv, *v.* 19 seems to show that the *עם הארץ* also rendered military service (*שר העבא המצביא את-עם הארץ*).

The highly placed men enumerated in Isa. ch. xxxiii, *ss.* 2 and 3 were, it seems, members of the *עם הארץ*. Isa. ch. v, *ss.* 8-23 are directed against the landowners (see especially *ss.* 8-10). *עם הארץ* is mentioned in Isa. ch. xxiv, *v.* 4: *אמללו מרום עם הארץ*. In *v.* 6 they are called *ישבי ארץ*. The whole ch. xxiv, it seems, is directed against the *עם הארץ*. The same, I think, can be said of ch. xxviii.

Jeremiah, in ch. i, *v.* 18, speaks of the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the *עם הארץ* in general. In ch. v Jeremiah speaks against the *עם הארץ* (cf. *ss.* 5, 17 and *v.* 31). The same can be said of ch. vii (cf. *v.* 16) and ch. viii (cf. *v.* 1 and *ss.* 5 and 10). In ch. xvii, *v.* 19 we read of the *בני העם*; in ch. xix, *v.* 1 of the *זקני העם*. Ch. xxii speaks of the *עם הארץ* (see *v.* 2, *ss.* 4 and 13 ff.). Ch. xxiii speaks of the *עם הארץ* (cf. *v.* 33). In ch. xxviii the *עם* in the sense of *עם הארץ* is mentioned several times. In the same sense *עם* is mentioned in ch. xxxiv (*ss.* 8, 10). In ch. xxxiv, *v.* 19 Jeremiah speaks of the princes of Judah and the princes of Jerusalem, the officers, and the priests and the whole *עם הארץ*. In ch. xxxix, *v.* 8 the house of the *עם הארץ* is called *בית העם* and is mentioned together with the house of the king. 'The House of Lords' is almost a literal translation of *בית העם*. In ch. xxxix, *v.* 10 we read of the *העם הרלים*. In ch. xlv, *v.* 21 Jeremiah speaks of the kings, the princes, and the *עם הארץ*. *עם הארץ*, or *עם*, is also mentioned several times in ch. lii.

Ezekiel ch. vii is directed against the lords of the land. Interesting is the exclamation in *v.* 2: *לארמת ישראל קץ* 'to the land of Israel (comes) an end'. The lords of the land will lose their land and all their possessions. Note in *v.* 7 *יושב הארץ*. And at the end of ch. vii *עם הארץ* is mentioned together with the king and the prince (in *v.* 27) and the priest and the prophet and the elders (in *v.* 26). In ch. xxii, *ss.* 23-31 are directed against the *עם הארץ*. The priests, the prophets, the princes, are mentioned, and then the *עם הארץ* is spoken of (*v.* 29). Ch. xxxiv is directed against the *עם הארץ*. They are called *רועי ישראל*. Ch. xlv speaks of the prince and of the *עם הארץ* (see especially *ss.* 16 and 22).

Amos, in ch. vi, speaks against the *עם הארץ* (called in *v.* 1 *ראשית הגוים*), also in ch. viii (in *v.* 2 *אל-עמי ישראל*).

Micah, in ch. ii and ch. iii, speaks against the עם הארץ (in ch. iii, v. 1 (ראש יעקב וקציני בית ישראל). In Hag. ch. ii, v. 4 the High Priest and the whole עם הארץ are mentioned together.

In Ps. cvii, v. 32 the עם הארץ is referred to in the words בקהל עם. Apart from this verse עם הארץ is not mentioned in the Psalms. The reason, it seems to me, is this: the Psalmist is not concerned with the עם הארץ as a group. The Psalmist is concerned more with the individual landowner, with the individual possessor of wealth. In a paper, which I read before the Society for Old Testament Study in December 1927, I endeavoured to shew that אדם, אדם, אדם בן אדם meant in many parts of the Old Testament, and particularly in the Book of Psalms, 'the man of wealth, the man of position (the man of the wealth was mainly the owner of land), the rich man', very often with the connotation of 'wicked'. בני אדם were 'the rich', very often 'the wicked rich'. And the Psalmist speaks against the individual בני אדם and for the בני עני. For this reason the עם הארץ is not mentioned in the Psalms.

In Job ch. xii, v. 2 עם has the meaning of עם הארץ. עם כי אתם-עם (v. 2) receives a much more pointed meaning: 'Surely, you are lords!'. And in v. 24 the ראשי עם הארץ, the heads of the עם הארץ, are mentioned together with counsellors, judges, kings, priests, the mighty ones (אתנים), men of trust, elders, princes, and the strong ones.

In Ezra, too, עם הארץ (עם הארץ is usually left out) means 'the lords of the land'. I hope, in the near future, to deal more fully with עם הארץ and עם הארץ in Ezra (especially with ch. iv, v. 4). Suffice it to say here that the עם mentioned in ch. ix, v. 1 were the עם הארץ. The princes spoke to Ezra. And 'the hand of the princes and rulers hath been first in this faithlessness' (v. 2). The lords of the land, the possessing classes, inter-married with the עמי הארצות (v. 2 and v. 11) or the עמי הארץ (ch. x, v. 2) of the other nations.

To sum up: עם הארץ in the whole of the Old Testament means 'the lords of the land', in the wider or narrower sense.

One more word about אדם. אדם was the individual member of the עם הארץ. (1) אדם, derived from אדמה in the sense of 'earth', means 'human being'. (2) אדם, derived from ארמה in the sense of 'land', means 'the possessor of land', 'the man of wealth'.

The meaning of עם הארץ suggested here will, I think, yield many important results for the exegesis of the Old Testament.

A word may be added on the post-Biblical meaning of עם הארץ, 'the ignorant people'.

In the course of time the עם הארץ fell into disrepute. The prophets spoke against them. In the time of Ezra they intermarried with the other nations. 'The lords of the land' became a byword for their wrongdoings and for their neglect of the Torah, and in later times they became the

prototype of the ignorant people. 'The lord of the land' became 'the ignorant peasant'. Hence the later term of *עם הארץ* for 'the ignorant people', or 'the ignorant man'. Thus this riddle also seems to be solved.

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A SYRIAC PATRISTIC MANUSCRIPT

WHILE glancing through the written hand-list of the Oriental manuscripts in the possession of the British Museum, I noticed one Syriac codex which seemed to me to be of considerable theological interest and importance. I propose, therefore, to give a description of this volume, together with some of its principal contents.

Oriental MS 8606, entered under the year 1920. It consists, in its present state, of 141 parchment folios, measuring 25.2 × 16.0 cm.; written in a beautiful Estrangela hand, in double columns, 36 lines to the column. Many of the leaves have been much damaged by exposure in a damp place. Parts of the original binding have been pasted on to the inside of the modern covers. The MS is dated, according to the most reasonable interpretation of the colophon, in Nisān, A. Gr. 1034 (A. D. 723). It is imperfect, at least nine leaves being wanting at the beginning, while between folios 94 and 95 two leaves have disappeared.

The twenty-two Homilies and letters contained in this codex are in every case by (or are, at least, attributed to) Orthodox or Chalcedonian authors—one of them being a translation of the famous Tome of Leo to Flavian. We are, therefore, as Mr E. W. Brooks was quick to point out to me, dealing with a Melchite MS. All but one of these Homilies and letters are translations of Greek patristic works, the exception being Item 17, a Homily by Ephraim on the Nativity, an original Syriac poem. The chief interest of the MS consists in the fact that, of the various pieces contained in it, at least two are, so far as I have been able to discover, no longer extant in Greek and have not till now been known in Syriac translations. These are Item 14, a Homily by Amphilochius of Iconium on John xiv 28, 'My father who sent me, is greater than I', and Item 22, a section of the Letter of Sophronius, Bishop of Jerusalem, to Arcadius, Bishop of Cyprus.

9. *Fol. 34 b to 43 a*. Again a homily of the same S. Athanasius the Bishop, which was said by him concerning the saying in the Gospel: 'He who blasphemes against the Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him' (Mark iii 29, Luke xii 10).

Beginning: 'concerning the saying in the Gospel to which while writing thou didst refer me, forgive me, O my beloved, having with