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Principal Skinner on Genesis.¹

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR JAMES ORR, D.D.

A FRESH measure of the magnitude of the revolution wrought by criticism in the methods of treatment of the Old Testament is afforded by the publication of this new volume of the "International Critical Commentary" on the Book of Genesis, by Principal Skinner, of Westminster College, Cambridge. No one, whatever his standpoint, will doubt the learning, thoroughness, and critical skill and acumen displayed by the scholarly author in the preparation of his work. With Dr. Driver's recent Commentary, this volume of Dr. Skinner's will easily take rank as foremost among the aids for the study of Genesis on modern critical lines. The pains bestowed on the Introduction and on every part of the exposition could not be surpassed. As a contribution to the series to which it belongs, the book will command the warmest praise.

In a critical respect, also, the book is less extreme in its opinions than many that might be named. An air of sobriety and candour pervades it, which will powerfully enhance its effect upon readers. For instance, Dr. Skinner separates himself from the view that the higher ideas and convictions in the J and E narratives—"the monotheistic conception of God, the ethical view of His providential government, and perhaps a conscious opposition to certain elements of popular cultus"—were first enunciated by the prophets of the eighth century. "In truth," he says, "it is questionable if any prophetic impulse at all, other than those inherent in the religion from its foundation by Moses, is necessary to account for the religious tone of the narratives of Genesis" (Introd., p. li). He agrees with Gunkel that the specific historical allusions as to the wars between Israel and Syria, supposed to be found in the Genesis narratives, are unreliable, and allows that there is nothing absolutely to

¹ "The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis," by John Skinner, D.D., Hon. M.A. (Cantab). Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark. 1910.

prevent us from putting the date of J as early as the reign of Solomon (p. liv). He thinks, however, that probably E belongs to the first half of the eighth century, and J to the ninth. In saying that "no one proposes to fix [E] higher" than *circa* 930 (p. liii), he does not show his usual precision. König, *e.g.*, places it in the time of the Judges, and J in the reign of David.

With all this moderation of tone, it is not to be thought that the learned Principal abates aught in his zeal in carrying through an unqualified critical treatment of the Book of Genesis, which ends, as it begins, by depriving the book of wellnigh every shred of historical value it was ever imagined by an unenlightened piety to possess. Of old, Genesis was conceived to contain the first chapters in the long history of revelation—great truths about the origin of the world, the origin of man, the origin of sin, the dawn of evangelical promise, God's covenants with the fathers, the first steps in the creation of a people for Himself, from whom Christ should arise. How much of this remains? Very little, and nothing that can be depended upon with certainty. A nebulous background of fact may exist for some of the patriarchal narratives; with care one may even "dissentangle from the mass of legendary accretions some elements of actual reminiscence of the prehistoric movements which determined the subsequent development of the national life" (p. xxiii). As we read the story of the faith of Abraham, "we may well trust the instinct which tells us that here we are face to face with a decisive act of the living God in history, and an act whose essential significance was never lost in Israelite tradition" (p. xxvii). On the other hand, "positive proof, such as would satisfy the canons of historical criticism, of the work of Abraham is not available" (p. xxvi); and what may be conceded for him does not apply to the other patriarchs. Genesis, in short, is of that class of legendary literature in which "tradition and phantasy are inseparably mingled" (p. iv), and in which it is impossible to effect any real separation of true from imaginative elements. We fail to observe a single incident

in the book which our author is prepared to accept as a real occurrence. Any attempt to rescue an historical basis for the narratives, even in such an episode as Gen. xiv., is almost uniformly met with adverse criticism.

In following this line, which instructively shows how much is to be expected from even the "moderate" school of criticism, Dr. Skinner takes somewhat bold ground in vindication. There is no loss, he thinks, in regarding Genesis as "legend"; for, "while legend is not history, it has in some respects a value greater than history" (p. iv). "Legend is, after all, a species of poetry," and, "as a vehicle of religious ideas, poetic narrative possesses obvious advantages over literal history" (p. v). We have heard something like this before. It is the sort of reasoning by which Strauss and his fellow-ideologists sought to commend their mythical treatment of the life of Jesus, and it would be well if those who use it would seriously consider how it applies in that supreme case. Revelation is, after all, historical. It was from the facts of God's dealings with men in supernatural ways that men came to know Him as they did. If the historical is taken from the revelation, whether in the life of Christ, or in the age of Moses, or in the age of the patriarchs, the revelation hangs in the air, and becomes more or less a tissue of men's phantasies. Dr. Skinner has another reason for not laying too much stress on the patriarchal narratives. He cannot assent to "the common argument that the mission of Moses would be unintelligible apart from that of Abraham. . . . That the distinctive institutions and ideas of the Yahwe religion could not have originated with Moses just as well as with Abraham is more than we have a right to affirm" (p. xxvi). Apart from the consideration that it is singularly few of the "institutions and ideas of the Yahwe religion" that criticism leaves with Moses any more than with Abraham, there seems to be in this statement a curious lack of historical perspective. We think again of Jesus, and ask, Could revelation have sprung up at once in Him without any preparation in law and prophets? Then, going back to Moses, could even that law-giver have

impressed his Yahwe religion on a wholly unprepared mass of escaped tribes, without even the bond of a common religious tradition to bind them together? Is there not more verisimilitude in the idea that a people should be prepared of God—disciplined by Divine revelation, by promise, by affliction—to receive the great message which Moses, in fulfilment of the Covenant with the fathers, brought them? That is undeniably how the history itself represents it, and one fails to see what Dr. Skinner has done to disprove its truth.

But what of all the learned reasonings that are now brought to bear upon the narratives to show that they *are* but late and unreliable legends—that they have not, and in the nature of the case cannot have, any value as history? Much might be said on this head, but very little must suffice. Not a little depends on the initial view taken of the narratives. They are described by our author as *Volksage*—“the mass of popular narrative *talk* about the past, which exists in more or less profusion amongst all races in the world” (p. iv). The remarkable canon is laid down that “the very picturesqueness and truth to life which are sometimes appealed to in proof of their historicity are, on the contrary, characteristic marks of legend” (p. vi). “The subject-matter of the tradition is of the kind congenial to the folk-lore all the world over, and altogether different from transactions on the stage of history. The proper theme of history is great public and political events; but legend delights in *genre* pictures, private and personal affairs, trivial anecdotes of domestic and everyday life, and so forth . . . that most of the stories of Genesis are of this description needs no proof” (p. vi). One reads such statements with astonishment. Is there, then, no difference between the material one finds in the Book of Genesis—those wonderful narratives, pregnant with the deepest ideas of revelation, prophetic in their outlook, set in a framework that looks out on all nations of mankind, moving resistlessly on to a future that culminates only in Christ—and the trivial folk-lore of other peoples? Where is the Bible to which that other folk-lore would prove a spiritual introduction? Dr. Skinner is not

consistent here, for he, too, recognizes a profound religious value in these narratives, and grants that *if* Abraham had the importance assigned to him, "the fact is just of the kind that might be expected to impress itself indelibly on a tradition dating from the time of the event" (p. xxvi). The same, however, applies to the bulk of the history. If there was a Divine call of Abraham, Divine covenants, promises cherished, and from time to time renewed, is it credible that these would *not* be carefully treasured, handed down with special care in instruction, recorded in some form, as early as circumstances permitted, preserved by a Divine Providence from loss and mutilation? If Dr. Skinner persuades himself that he has overturned this view of the patriarchal tradition, he labours under a great delusion. Genesis, as he himself describes it, remains "the book of Hebrew origins." "It is a peculiarity of the Pentateuch that it is law-book and history in one. While its main purpose is legislative, the laws are set in framework of narrative, and so, as it were, are woven into the texture of the nation's life. Genesis contains a minimum of legislation; but its narrative is the indispensable prelude to that account of Israel's formative period in which the fundamental institutions of the theocracy are embedded" (p. ii).

It would be endless to discuss the criticisms and objections by which the historical value of the narratives is sought to be broken down, and it need not be attempted. The present writer, in his efforts to show reason for a more positive view, comes in for notice, and naturally is adversely criticized. Dr. Skinner, however, seriously mistakes when he supposes that the main matter for which a stand is made by the writer is the unity of J and E. That is an issue to be determined on its own merits, but is not vital to the argument of the book on which comment is made. The essential point there is the reality of the supernatural revelation as depicted in its successive stages—patriarchal, Mosaic, prophetic—in contrast with the modern critical subversion of the history. In some respects the recognition of a twofold source of the history (J and E) is

a strengthening of the argument, not a weakening of it. But the writer finds little in Dr. Skinner's pages to remove his doubt as to whether these sources are really distinct. The crevices in his argument appear in his whole discussion of the character, age, relations, priority, and compositeness of the alleged documents, and finally in his adoption of the view that they are not the work of individual writers at all, but of "schools." The idea of two "schools" subsisting side by side, one maintaining the exclusive use of Jehovah, the other of Elohim, with minute nuances of expression, is too artificial to bear criticism. Our author grants nearly all that is contended for in conceding "the extraordinarily close parallelism, both in matter and form," of J and E (p. xliv, *cf.* p. xxx), and in remarking that if "they are the work of schools rather than of individuals, it is obvious that the search for characteristic differences loses much of its interest; and, in point of fact, the attempt to delineate two well-defined literary types is apt to be defeated by the widely contrasted features which have to find a place in one and the same picture" (p. xlvii).

Dr. Skinner sees nothing to be surprised at in the fact that it takes both J and P in the story of the flood to furnish a parallel to the Babylonian story, and still maintains that P (with all its differences of style and dignity in different parts, and unaccountable hiatuses after E enters) is a single and independent history. It is not, however, Dr. Orr and Klostermann alone, but Graf himself, who questioned the independence of P, and the recent criticisms of Eerdmans, referred to, but not met, by Dr. Skinner, strongly support the opposite view. Dr. Skinner is convinced that "the discovery of the Babylonian versions of the Creation and Deluge traditions has put it beyond reasonable doubt that these are the originals from which the Biblical accounts have been derived" (p. ix). Yet Dr. Clay, of Pennsylvania University, now of Yale, has just published a work, "Amurra and Babylonia," in which it is forcibly argued that the Babylonians are the borrowers from the West. That the tide is not all flowing in one direction may be gathered from

such a sentence as the following : " In the opinion of a growing and influential school of writers, this period of history [2000-1500 B.C.] has been so illumined by recent discoveries that it is no longer possible to doubt the essential historicity of the patriarchal tradition " (p. xv).

Dr. Skinner, however, does doubt it, and minimizes to an undue extent the force of these discoveries. One example is in Gen. xiv., which Dr. Driver likewise uses as an illustration of how anti-critical writers (the present writer included) "mislead" their readers ("Genesis," seventh edition, Addenda, p. 173). Nöldeke denied the historicity of the chapter, but it is claimed that Nöldeke has been misrepresented. The charge of misleading, were that called for, might very easily be retorted. Anyone reading Dr. Driver, with the sentences he quotes, would infer that, while led by internal improbabilities to doubt the history of Chedorlaomer's expedition, Nöldeke was exceedingly cautious in his charges against the historicity of Gen. xiv., and designedly left open the possibility of the historical framework—that part which archæology tends to confirm—turning out to be true. In reality the utmost that Nöldeke admits is that the author *may* have picked up a few right names in some unknown connection, and used them, intermingled with false and invented ones, to give a deceptive appearance of antiquity to his narrative. What discovery seems to establish is not the chance historical truth of one or two names inserted at random, but the minute accuracy in time, place, historical relations, of the complicated situation described—knowledge which a late, romancing writer could not have possessed. Nöldeke scouts the idea of the writer having means of true knowledge of these distant times. Schrader and Diestel combated his objections to the expedition. It is not the case either that Abraham's pursuit was undertaken only by his 318 trained men. Three allies are mentioned (verses 13, 24), though these are arbitrarily set aside as unhistorical. The force was small, but, like Gideon's (Judg. vii.), achieved a wonderful success.

The sublimity and profound religious ideas of Gen. i. are

recognized by Dr. Skinner (pp. 6, 7): "When to these we add the doctrine of man as made in the likeness of God, and marked out as the crown and goal of creation, we have a body of religious truth which distinguishes the cosmogony of Genesis from all similar compositions, and entitles it to rank among the most important documents of revealed religion." It hardly comports with this when, in the Commentary, he finds the "image of God" primarily in the bodily form (p. 32). The description given of P as lacking in interest for the deeper problems of religion, such as the origin of evil (p. lxi), is really owing to the thin thread of the P part being separated from the JE narrative, which it presupposes (Wellhausen admits that P presupposes the J story of the Fall). But the subject cannot here be pursued further.

The text deserves praise for its great correctness, but "p. 345," in note to *Introd.*, p. 1, seems a mistake for "p. 445."



The Last of an Old Line.

By T. H. S. ESCOTT.

WITH the peaceful close, last August 7, of the Rev. Hay S. Escott's long, laborious, and beneficent course in the Rectory House of a village immortalized by Wordsworth, one of the old Evangelicals passed away. Born in C. J. Vaughan's year, 1816, without rivalling at Oxford the supreme honours which stamped the Harrow Head-master as first among the Cambridge classicists of his day, the West Somerset clergyman recently departed shared Vaughan's theological opinions, and on various scholastic matters occasionally found himself in communication with him. The two sometimes even may be said to have exchanged pupils, for Sir John Kennaway, till recently the "father of the House of Commons," had read with Mr. Escott before going from Harrow to Balliol; while subse-