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## CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the foregoing survey will provide a small glimpse - and it is but a small one - of the contribution that Ancient Oriental studies are making and can yet make to our understanding of the Old Testament and its world today. If these studies can continue to flourish in this uncertain world, they hold the exciting promise of still further aids to understanding, new perspectives, unforeseeable discoveries.

In the future, correlation of the Old Testament and the Ancient Orient ought ultimately to be conducted on a much more fundamental and systematic basis than ever before. While a great deal of really valuable work has been done, and is constantly continuing, it is often very piecemeal and there is room for something more purposeful. Some day, there ought to be set out a kind of 'comparative grid' or graph of Ancient Oriental data to cover every aspect of contact between the Old Testament and the Ancient Orient. Thus, on a given topic, the material available ought to be fully collected and sifted both across the 'grid' and down the 'grid'. In other words, the material on a given topic must be separately collected and classified for each main culture or area in the Ancient Orient, and within each such spatial division this material must then be further classified on a chronological basis, period by period, whenever possible. A full picture of a given topic in all its variations (on available evidence) can then be gained for the whole Ancient Orient and its main epochs. Next one must plot against this background the data of the Old Testament *as it stands*, and see how it connects with an objectively-established environment.

All too obviously, this vast task cannot be done at once; but it can be pursued bit by bit consciously, and sectional results used as they are gained. Needless to say, this is work for

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Orientalists rather than theologians, but the material and results would have to be made available to the latter in suitable form. Prior theories about the Old Testament would have to be rigorously tested against the accumulated facts. The days of 'primitive Israel', treated as though she had developed in isolation, are over and gone, obsolete beyond recall; if the Patriarchs had lived in 7000 or 6000 BC, and the Exodus taken place in 5000, 'primitive Hebrews' would have been conceivable - but not so very late in the culture and history of the Ancient Near East as the second and first millennia BC.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, it may perhaps be thought by some that run-of-the-mill Old Testament studies have come in for considerable incidental criticism. The criticisms that have been offered here are not, of course, directed at any such scholars personally. Some are very highly gifted men, and the writer has learnt much (and pleasurably) from their works.<sup>2</sup> The criticisms made apply to facts and methods, and arise simply from the basic fact that the Ancient Orient provides means of external control upon our study of the Old Testament. The theories current in Old Testament studies, however brilliantly conceived and elaborated, were mainly established in a vacuum with little or no reference to the Ancient Near East, and initially too often in accordance with *a priori*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, p. 37, note 10, on antiquity of pre-literate high cultures.

<sup>2</sup> Not least from various works of Eissfeldt and Noth, several times cited in reference to views found untenable or unrealistic in this work.

philosophical and literary principles. It is solely because the data from the Ancient Near East coincide so much better with the existing observable structure of Old Testament history, literature and religion than with the theoretical reconstructions, that we are compelled - as happens in Ancient Oriental studies - to question or even to abandon such theories regardless of their popularity. Facts not votes determine the truth. We do not here merely advocate a return to 'pre-critical' views and traditions (*e.g.*, of authorship) merely for their own sake or for the sake of theological orthodoxy. Let it be clearly noted that *no appeal whatsoever* has been made to any theological starting-point in the body of this work, not to mention the miasma of late post-biblical

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Jewish or patristic (or later) Christian traditions. If some of the results reached here approximate to a traditional view or seem to agree with theological orthodoxy, then this is simply because the tradition in question or that orthodoxy are that much closer to the real facts than is commonly realized. While one must indeed never prefer mere orthodoxy to truth, it is also perverse to deny that orthodox views can be true.

As far as the historic Christian faith is concerned, it should have nothing to fear from any soundly-based and fair-minded intellectual investigation (anything less than this is, *ipso facto*, invalid). Its truth must stand or fall with that of Him who said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (Jn. 14:6; *cf.* 7:17).