

Present Trend in O.T. Theology as Represented in the Albright Influence

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[p.1]

Among trends in contemporary Old Testament scholarship, one of the more significant is headed by William Foxwell Albright of Johns Hopkins University. This survey is an attempt to give in brief compass a sketch of the Albright position as it relates particularly to Old Testament history and to point out some of its contrasts with the older Wellhausen type of view. The writer in 1949 wrote his Master's Thesis on this subject, entitled, "Hebrew Monotheism in Connection with Albright's Position and That Traditional to the Wellhausen School," and intends in this survey to use that material freely, even to the extent of direct quotation in several places.

It is well first to give indication that there is what may be called an Albright school of thought coming into existence today. Dr. Frank Cross, former student under Albright and one whom Albright has indicated in personal correspondence with the author is qualified to speak for the position, writes, "there is an Albright school coming into being today: a school far wider than Biblical studies, and one I fully expect to be dominant in another generation."¹ Further Cross states, "The extent of the influence of Albright's impact upon Wellhausenism cannot yet be measured. In the field of Catholic scholarship, and to some degree in England, and particularly on the Continent, Albright has already become a dominant figure... the wider area of Albright's scholarship is more appreciated outside of America."²

The reason for the wide acceptance which this recent view is receiving lies in the character of its principal source of information: that source being archaeological discoveries in Bible lands. The reason why this source, which of course has been a principal fountain point also for Wellhausenism for some time, has led Albright to his contrasting position today is that, as he himself tells us, "Though archaeological research goes back over a century in Palestine and Syria, it is only since 1920 that our material has become sufficiently extensive and clearly enough interpreted to be of really decisive value."³ And also, as he further points out, this material and these interpretations have not been in keeping with the older Wellhausen presentations on many points. And the reason why Albright is today the leader in this school of thought, rather than someone else, is, in the words of Cross, "Because of his dominating leadership in the fields of Palestinian archaeology, Near Eastern history, comparative religion, and comparative Semitic languages."⁴ He further writes in this connection, "No Biblical scholar in America has been able to rise as a suitable disputant."⁵

Before touching on a few main features of this new position, it is necessary to indicate something as to the philosophic and theological viewpoint

¹ Quotation from personal letter received by author, Jan. 1949.

² *Idem.*

³ *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 37.

⁴ *Op. cit.*

⁵ *Idem.*

[p.2]

from which it takes its roots. Not only is a knowledge of this viewpoint necessary for the understanding of the position, but this viewpoint of itself provides another aspect to the trend which bids likewise to be of marked significance. Here there is appearing a union between two branches of theological pursuit, both of which are making an important play in contemporary thought. The one is, of course, that with which this paper deals, namely the Albright view in the field of Old Testament studies, and the other is that of neo-orthodoxy in the field of Systematics. That union is being made in that the Albright school seems to be finding a congenial theological atmosphere in neo-orthodoxy in which to work as it pursues its endeavors in the field of Old Testament history. Albright is himself an adherent of the neo-orthodox type of view. He says of himself that as a Christian theist he "mediates between neo-orthodox and neo-Thomists, with important differences from both."⁶ Again he writes, "I have much sympathy for the Neo-orthodox position."⁷ Cross says of him, "Albright's theological position falls somewhere between Neo-Thomism and Neo-Calvinism."⁸

Now the question rises as to what extent this theological position has made influence upon the historical studies of the man. Has he been led thereby in his work to a recognition of supernaturalism in Israel's history, which thing would be highly regarded by conservative students, but would at the same time throw him open to the charge by traditional critics that he was merely acting as another conservative apologist? The answer is that he intends not to be so influenced. Cross writes in connection with the matter, "It must be most urgently emphasized... that Albright is an historian most akin to the positivists in methodology though admittedly with theistic assumptions forming a background."⁹ Albright himself gives us, "To the extent that the writer (himself) deals with historical problems, he employs the same analytic and synthetical methods which have proved so successful elsewhere in reconstructing the historic past... these methods are logically identical with the scientific methodology of the natural and social sciences."¹⁰ The reason why he can proceed as a naturalist in his historiographical work, while at the same time being a supernaturalist in his theology, is of course due to the type of supernaturalism to which he holds; a type which confines the understandable theological influence to the realm of "superhistory", leaving time to be explored solely through naturalistic lenses as if there were no supernatural, since if there should be we could not understand it anyhow. The very term of self-classification which Albright uses in naming his own view brings out the same fact: it is "rational conservative", which name Cross explains as 'follows: "The 'rational' applies to his rigorous scientific methodology; the 'conservative' applying to his theological position and his appreciation of Biblical records as sources of history."¹¹

We come now to look briefly at the view itself, and limit ourselves to four major aspects of it. We shall treat the view first as to its position regarding the "documentary theory"; secondly,

⁶ *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. vii.

⁷ Quotation from personal letter received by the author, Jan. 1949.

⁸ *Op. cit.*

⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. vii.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*

as to the historicity of the patriarchal period; thirdly, as to the question of monotheism in Israel; and, fourthly, as to the writing of Deuteronomy.

Taking the first of these, now, it may be stated very quickly that Albright does hold to the existence of documents in the Old Testament, and, what is

[p.3]

more, assigns them to much the same dates as the Wellhausen school. For instance, writing concerning the date of the so-called J and E documents, he says, "So we come again to the accepted date between 925 and 750 B.C. for the original content of both J and E."¹² It appears, then, that on this score he is quite in line with the older thinking of the Wellhausen group. However, it should at least be mentioned here in passing that he differs markedly from them in the type of argumentation by which he is led to accept this view. Something of this difference will appear when we deal later with the question of the writing of Deuteronomy.

Coming now to the second of our topics, the view as it pertains to patriarchal history, we give first a statement regarding the pre-patriarchal time. This we take from the Thesis mentioned in the first part of this paper, where we read, "So far as the stories found in the first eleven chapters of Genesis are concerned, we find little change with Albright from the former group. For whenever he speaks of these stories, which again is not often, he too speaks of them as myth. For instance, he classes the creation story as being among the 'creation myths' which were held among primitive tribes in both continents." etc.^{13,14}

Regarding the patriarchal time proper, we continue to quote directly from the Thesis: "We do find appreciable change, however, with Albright over the representatives of the former view (Wellhausen) when we come to treat the patriarchal age. Albright himself tells us this in clear language as he follows a statement regarding Wellhausen with the following words: 'Practically all of the Old Testament scholars of standing in Europe and America held these (Wellhausen) or similar views until very recently. Now, however, the situation is changing with the greatest rapidity, since the theory of Wellhausen will not bear the test of archaeological examination.'¹⁵ ...And this change is that Albright believes the stories here concerned are far more historical than these former critics have admitted. He says, 'the saga of the Patriarchs is essentially historical.'¹⁶ And again he writes, 'So many corroborations of details have been discovered in recent years that most competent scholars have given up the old critical theory according to which the stories of the Patriarchs are mostly retrojections from the time of the Dual Monarchy (9th-8th centuries B.C.)... The figures of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph appear before us as real personalities, each one of whom shows traits and qualities which suit his character but would not harmonize with the characters of others.'^{17,18}

¹² *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 190; cf. his *Arch. of Pal. And the Bible*, pp. 146-162, for detailed accounting.

¹³ *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 128.

¹⁴ Thesis, p. 23.

¹⁵ *Arch. of Pal. & Bible*, p. 129.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁷ *Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 183.

¹⁸ Thesis, pp. 23, 24.

We come now to the third of our topics, that regarding the existence of monotheism in Israel. First we observe that Albright is in agreement with the Wellhausen type of thought in believing that monotheism did have a beginning with Israel as over against the conservative view that monotheism was never the fruit of development. However, he differs considerably from them as to the time of this beginning. Whereas the older view has continued to maintain the non-existence of monotheism until at least the days of Amos, Albright places it even so early as Moses. Since he does, we may limit our treatment of his view of monotheism's rise to the Mosaic time. Again quotation is made in this connection from the Thesis:

[p.4]

"What does Albright have to say regarding the Mosaic conception of Yahweh?" In coming upon our answer, we find it to be in contrast, indeed, with the former (Wellhausen) position. For it is not a polytheism, which he assigns to the leader of Israel, neither is it a henotheism, which the most moderate critics hitherto have made out, but it is a real monotheism... His own words on this score are as follows: 'If the term 'monotheism' means one who teaches the existence of only one God, the creator of everything, the source of justice, who is equally powerful in Egypt, in the desert, and in Palestine, who has no sexuality and no mythology, who is human in form but cannot be seen by human eye and cannot be represent in any form—then the founder of Yahwism was certainly a monotheist.'¹⁹ And in another connection he speaks similarly: Mosaism is a living tradition, an integrated organismic pattern, which did not change in fundamentals from the time of Moses until the time of Christ; Moses was as much a monotheism as was Hillel, though his point of view may have been very different in detail.'²⁰

Another statement of his, in that it bears on the point of universality which the critics have long contended arose with Amos, will be of further value in this connection: 'Still another equally original characteristic of Yahweh is that He is not restricted to any special abode. As the Lord of all cosmic forces, controlling sun, moon, and storm but not identified with any of them, His normal dwelling place is in heaven, from which He may come down, whether to a lofty mountain like Sinai, to a shrine like the Tabernacle, or to any spot which He may choose.'^{21,22}

Finally we come to his view regarding the writing of Deuteronomy. Once again we find him differing markedly from the Wellhausen presentation. We quote further from the Thesis: "It should be noted that Albright's idea for the writing of Deuteronomy... is very different from that of Pfeiffer. Albright speaks of the writing as not being a 'pious fraud' as the former view has long done, but as a genuine return to the spirit, and even the writings to some extent, of Moses. His own words are: 'In the light of these extra-Palestinian parallels the Deuteronomic movement of the late seventh century appears somewhat differently from the interpretation given it by the school of Wellhausen. Instead Of being a progressive reform based on an advance beyond previous levels of religion and cult, it was a conscious effort to recapture both the letter and the spirit of Mosaism which, the Deuteronomists believed, had been neglected or forgotten by the Israelites of the Monarchy. The theory of De Wette and his

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 207; cf. pp. 196-207 for his argumentation to this end.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 309.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²² Thesis, pp. 34, 35.

successors that Deuteronomy is 'pious fraud' is contrary to ancient Oriental practice; the materials contained in the book were really believed to go back to Moses and probably do reflect, in general, a true Mosaic atmosphere.²³ ... Another major difference between Albright and the other type of view concerns the matter of unification of sanctuary, already spoken of in an earlier connection. Albright does not believe that this unification idea was brought forward for the first time in the day of Josiah, but rather he thinks it was emphasized, as in Deuteronomy 12, in the ninth century already. He writes: "in our judgment, it (Deuteronomy) was written down as a unit, in the ninth century B.C., and was edited in the reign of Josiah or later... It was probable that Shechem followed Shiloh as the cult-center of the Joseph tribes, and that the famous passage concerning the unification of cult in one place (12:8ff., compared with 11:30) was originally intended to uphold the posi-

[p.5]

tion of Shechem (following Shiloh). The passage is certainly too vague to represent an original composition of the time of Josiah, for the purpose of ensuring Jerusalem a unique position as a cult-center.²⁴ And, further, in commenting upon the fact that this position takes away a great deal from the Wellhausen position, he says, "If we admit the necessity of some central shrine at the beginning of Israelite history, we have already torn the foundation from under the Wellhausen theory. There is then no further difficulty in the way of our ninth century date for the bulk of Deuteronomy, including the nucleus, at least, of chapter XII."^{25,26}

By way of summary now, it may be observed from the foregoing that there is unquestionably a definite line of cleavage between the Albright presentation and that of the older Wellhausen group in many respects. True, in respect to the "documentary theory" he seems to differ little from them, except that the type of argumentation by which he is led to it varies from theirs. However, when we look at the other three aspects treated there appear marked changes. To him the Patriarchs are real personalities, doing the things and living in the places, at least in large part, as indicated in Scripture. How different is this from the talk of myth and folklore by the Wellhausen followers: Then to put monotheism back with Moses is something quite in opposition indeed to the older view, which has continued to maintain the day of Amos as being the earliest possible time to assign such development. Lastly, to say that Deuteronomy is not a "pious fraud" in any sense but rather a true return to the spirit and even in measurable extent the letter of Moses himself is again a revolutionary insertion into the stream of higher criticism.

Of course let us not hastily conclude that Albright is to be classed among the ranks of the conservatives. He does not desire any such thing, and surely we must not make the mistake of attributing it to him. In fact, Dr. Cross says very plainly of Albright that "he is in many respects a Wellhausenist."²⁷ Certainly he is far more a Wellhausenist than he is a conservative, which fact also appears from the foregoing discussion. With this being said, it still remains that if the Albright view is even to be classified as merely a new Wellhausenism, which thing may or may not be accurate, still these striking changes from the older view surely point to a

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 244; cf. 240-246 for full account.

²⁴ *Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible*, p. 155, 156.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.152; cf. pp. 146-162 for full treatment of this question.

²⁶ Thesis, pp. 73-75.

²⁷ *Op.cit.*

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new day in higher criticism. It is a trend that bids to become of continually growing importance as our contemporary day passes before us.

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